

Malnutrition: How food helps keep us healthy

This article was written for the WRHA Wave magazine in 2018 by dietitians Lisa Begg and Sarah Ross. With permission, it has been updated with new Canada Food Guide information and includes local resources within the Interlake Eastern Regional Health Authority.

In every stage of life, we need nutritious food to thrive.

From infancy through to our later years, we depend on a healthy diet packed with nutrients to help build strong bones and muscles, stave off chronic diseases and give us the energy we need to live our lives.

And yet, many among us are not getting the nutrition we need to maintain our health.

In fact, a large national study recently found that upon admission to Canadian hospitals, 45 per cent of patients were found to be malnourished. In other words, almost half of the patients were not meeting their nutrition requirements in order to stay healthy.

So what accounts for this problem? Part of the answer is that many Canadians have a limited understanding of malnutrition and how it occurs.

Most people associate malnutrition with severe muscle and fat loss, and the appearance of being underweight. But while that is sometimes the case, it is also true that malnutrition can affect **anyone**, regardless of body shape or size. That's because malnutrition is not only about how much you eat, it is about whether the food you consume contains the nutrients you need to stay healthy.

Consider the following examples:

A three-year-old has been diagnosed with iron deficiency anemia. He has been taking in excessive amounts of milk and juice, displacing his appetite for iron-rich foods such as meat, fish, and legumes. Iron deficiency can result in fatigue and difficulty with concentration and learning.

A 12-year-old avoids milk, but is not aware of her calcium needs and isn't replacing milk with other high-calcium foods. Adolescence is a time of peak bone formation. If she misses the opportunity to grow strong, dense bones, she may increase her risk for developing osteoporosis later in her life.

A 40-year-old is regularly missing meals and relying on processed foods. Over time, his diet becomes low in vegetables, fruits, and fibre, and high in fats, sugar and sodium, which can increase his risk for developing high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and Type 2 diabetes.

A 70-year-old who lives alone, has become less interested in cooking and has lost some weight. In older adults, the lack of adequate calories and protein can result in muscle loss and reduced strength, which can in turn limit mobility and increase the risk of falls.

As all of these cases illustrate, malnutrition does not happen overnight. It stems from a pattern of eating over time, is related to many factors, and usually takes months or years before it manifests itself in physical signs or symptoms.

So, what can you do to ensure you and your loved ones are getting the nutrition needed to stay healthy? Start by learning about the risk factors for malnutrition, which include:

- Relying on others to shop and prepare your food
- Having a decreased appetite
- Following a restrictive diet
- Having multiple chronic health conditions
- Taking multiple medications
- Having depression, anxiety, or psychological stress
- Being socially isolated
- Having chewing or swallowing problems
- Having difficulty paying for food or bills each month
- Lacking transportation to get to full service grocery stores

If you or someone you know has some of these risk factors, you should take steps to address them. Fortunately, there are many resources available to help you or a loved one develop healthy eating habits. *Canada's Food Guide*, for example, is a terrific source of information about nutrition. Among other things, it emphasizes all aspects of healthy eating, not just the foods we eat. Being mindful of your eating habits, eating meals with others, and enjoying our foods all play a role in healthy eating.

As you take the necessary steps to improve your diet, remember to be patient. Every change you make will take a bit of time and practice, whether it is a small change like learning a new recipe or a bigger change like starting to eat breakfast regularly. The important thing is to keep at it because every effort we make to eat and live well adds up and brings us better health and vitality.

If you would like to connect with a dietitian in your area for some support on your journey to healthier eating habits, you can call your local IERHA Primary Care Clinic (Health Center) to make an appointment <https://www.ierha.ca/default.aspx?cid=6119&lang=1> For general nutrition advice, call Dial-a-Dietitian province-wide at 1-877-830-2892

[Click here for a listing of nutrition resources.](#)