Malnutrition

Key points

- Malnutrition occurs when the body's nutritional needs are not met
- Malnutrition is linked with poor health and reduced quality of life
- Malnutrition is not easily identified which leads to increased risk in both community and acute settings
- Older people have an increased risk of malnutrition
- An Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) can help prevent and treat malnutrition

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What is malnutrition?

Malnutrition occurs over time if someone does not meet their nutritional needs. This may be due to not eating enough, or the right types of food, or if our body can't absorb all the nutrients from food.

Malnutrition is linked with poor health and can affect quality of life.

Malnutrition is a major health issue. Around 50% of older Australians are at risk of or have malnutrition.

Screening and monitoring for malnutrition is vital, as early detection can prevent the need for major treatments.

What are the symptoms of malnutrition?

Symptoms of malnutrition include:

- Loss of appetite
- Unintentional weight loss (weight loss without trying)
- Reduced/loss of strength
- Increased difficulty performing daily tasks, such as chores
- Muscle loss
- Hair loss
- Pale skin
- Fatigue
- Confusion
- Poor wound healing

Who is at risk of malnutrition?

People with special nutritional needs, those hospitalised and older people have an increased risk of malnutrition. These include people with:

- A poor appetite and/or gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea or constipation
- Illnesses that increase nutritional needs, including kidney failure or cancer
- Illnesses that lead to poor nutrient absorption (e.g. Crohn's disease)
- Disordered eating

People who are hospitalised

People who are hospitalised may have an increased risk of malnutrition due to:

- appetite loss
- difficulty eating and drinking
- reduced physical activity
- isolation and separation from family.

Older people

Older people may have an increased risk of malnutrition due to:

- illnesses (including those above)
- dental problems
- psychological distress and/or dementia
- medication side effects
- social isolation
- financial or food access difficulties
- shopping or cooking difficulties.

Find a dietitian to treat malnutrition

Impacts of malnutrition

Malnutrition can lead to:

- illness, infection, falls, pressure wounds, and hospitalisation
- longer recovery time from illness or injury, including increased length of hospital stay
- decreased independence (more help needed for day-to-day tasks).

How can malnutrition be prevented?

- eat a healthy and balanced diet
- consume a variety of foods from the main food groups in theAustralian Guide to Healthy Eating
- speak to your dietitian or GP if you have any concerns on malnutrition.

How is malnutrition treated?

An Accredited Practising Dietitian can help people with malnutrition or those at risk. They provide practical and personalised dietary advice to help them meet their nutritional needs and improve their health.

Other health professionals can help manage malnutrition. For example, an Accredited Exercise Physiologist can provide exercise support to prevent muscle loss.

Eating a variety of foods will help to meet nutritional needs. Some considerations are particularly important, including:

Energy (kilojoules)

Energy helps prevent unexplained weight and muscle loss. Foods high in energy include:

- Full cream dairy products (milk, yoghurt, cream, cheese, ice cream)
- Butter and margarine
- Nut and nut butters
- Full fat salad dressing
- Pastries, cakes, biscuits and chips

Protein

Protein builds and repairs muscle and body cells. Foods high in protein include:

- Meat, fish, chicken and eggs
- Full cream dairy (milk, yoghurt, cheese)
- Nuts and seeds
- Soy products (tofu, soy milk)
- Legumes (baked beans, chickpeas, tinned beans).

Additional tips for managing malnutrition

- Eat small, frequent meals and snacks throughout the day: having six small meals instead of three large meals may be easier to manage.
- Consume drinks between meals, rather than large amounts with meals.
- Opt for milk-based drinks (such as milkshakes and smoothies) and fruit juices, as these offer more nutrition than water, tea or coffee.

- Add oil, cream, butter/margarine and grated cheese to meals, sauces and dressings
- Add skim milk powder to soups, stews and drinks.
- Make high protein milk: mix 500ml full cream milk with ½ cup skim milk powder. Refrigerate and use in place of ordinary milk.
- Snack on cheese on crackers, yoghurt, peanut butter toast, nuts and dried fruit.
- Avoid sugar-free or diet foods and drinks (for example, diet drinks and sugar-free jellies).
- Look for easy-to-make or ready-made frozen or chilled meals such as crumbed fish, lasagne, quiche and pies.
- Choose dairy-based desserts such as creamed rice, custard, ice cream and cheesecake
- Make meals enjoyable: eat with others when possible, use a comfortable seat and adequate lighting.
- Help those who have difficulty eating or preparing meals. For example, help them open packaging, chop ingredients, or lift heavy pots/pans.

When to see a dietitian



We recommend seeing a dietitian if you:

- Have any signs or symptoms of malnutrition
- Worry about meeting your nutritional needs
- Are screened for malnutrition by a healthcare professional and told you are at risk
- Would like advice on the prevention, identification or treatment of malnutrition.

Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) are university-trained nutrition experts. They can help you with personalised, easy-to-follow and evidence-based advice.

APDs are Australia's most trusted dietetics professionals.

Find a dietitian

Top tips

- Consume a varied and well-balanced diet to meet your nutritional needs.
- If you have a low appetite, eat small, frequent meals and snacks, high in energy and protein.
- If you have any symptoms, ensure your healthcare professional screens and monitors malnutrition.

Our position

Mandatory malnutrition screening, together with regular re-screening, is vital to ensure aged care providers can take action to reduce the progression of malnutrition.

Malnutrition in Aged Care (December 2020)

This health advice page was peer-reviewed by an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) in October 2026.