

Are you eating enough?

Advice for older people





Keeping to a healthy weight is important in later life

It's not good to be overweight but equally, it's not healthy to be underweight. It's easy for weight to drop off without noticing, so it's a good idea to check that your weight is within a healthy range.

If you've noticed that you have a smaller appetite and have lost weight (gradual or rapid) it may be time to act. Significant, unintended weight loss makes you more likely to get ill or have a fall.

As well as making you feel unwell, it can slow down your recovery from illness or surgery.

This leaflet will help you spot signs of weight loss that you may not notice, offer advice on what to do, meal suggestions and advice on where you can get help.



Signs of unhealthy weight loss



Getting thinner is not a normal part of getting older. To help ensure good health in later life, it is important to maintain a healthy, stable weight.

Weight loss may be gradual, over a period of time, or sudden. Rapid and unintended weight loss may be associated with a health issue, so it is important to speak to your GP or practice nurse if you are worried.

There are, however, a number of reasons why we might lose weight when we get older. We may be eating less if we are less interested in food, especially when feeling down. Cooking and shopping can be more of an effort and having to manage on a tight budget can make it more difficult to get enough food.

Medicines can also alter the taste of food, which can put us off our favourite meals.

Some signs, such as loose fitting clothes, may be obvious, however there are other signs to look out for:

Have you noticed...

- » A smaller appetite than usual?
- » Your jewellery slipping off or becoming loose?
- » That you've had to tighten your belt buckle an extra notch?
- » Changes in your mood?
- » That you get more colds or infections and find it takes longer than usual to get over illness?
- » Your dentures have become loose?
- » That you're more tired than usual or you feel lethargic?
- » That you find it difficult to keep yourself warm?
- » That you feel dizzy sometimes?





What you can do

There are a number of things you can do that may encourage you to eat more so that you feel well and stay healthy.

- » If you have a small appetite, eating small meals and snacks six times a day rather than three bigger meals may be more appealing. Try out the tasty recipes on page 8–9.
- » As you're trying to put on weight, full fat rather than low fat foods are the ones that you should be opting for.
- » If you have difficulty chewing, try eating soft foods such as scrambled eggs or yoghurts.
- » If your teeth or dentures are a problem, make an appointment with your dentist.

If you're worried about weight loss and have a small appetite, or have difficulty swallowing food, talk to your GP or Practice Nurse and perhaps ask a friend, relative or carer to go with you.

- » Think about the foods that you enjoy and eat small portions of these foods.
- » If you're having trouble cooking or cutting up food, ask a friend, relative or carer to help you.
- » If you have trouble shopping or cooking food, you can ask a local community organisation or your local council for help.
- » Introduce a regular snack around a favourite TV programme.
- » Ask a friend or relative out to a café or ask a community organisation for information about lunch clubs.
- » If someone prepares your meals, talk to them about the foods you like to eat and the portion sizes.
- » Pull out the meal planner in the centre of this leaflet and put it on your fridge to inspire meal ideas.
- » Keep a record of your weight and regularly check your weight. If you're concerned, do speak to your GP or Practice Nurse.

Easy ways to add extra nutrition to small meals

Most advice around healthy eating recommends foods that are low in fat. This is because it is aimed at people who should avoid putting on weight. If you are losing weight this advice does not apply to you at the moment. You should be eating food that is high in energy to gain weight.

Full fat milk and cheese added to meals increase their energy and protein content. They are also good sources of calcium, which is essential to keep bones healthy.

If you have heart disease, diabetes or another long-term illness, you must watch what you eat. Your GP will be able to advise on the best food to eat.

If you can't face or prepare three meals a day, try to eat little and often – six small meals are as good as three meals a day. It's also important to include small portions of fruit and vegetables every day to keep a balanced diet.

Six small meals are as good as three main meals a day.



Easy ways to add extra protein and calories without adding volume to food:

- » Add honey, sugar, jam or double cream to porridge, desserts and cereals.
- » Add double cream to soups and mashed potatoes.
- » Add butter, margarine and cheese to meals and sauces, and mayonnaise to salads.
- » Cook rice with coconut milk, and curries with ghee (clarified butter).
- » Aim for 8–10 drinks a day. Try full fat milk based drinks like milky coffee, and drink fruit juices.

If you are diabetic, do not add extra sugar or honey to meals or drinks. Always check with your GP when making changes to your diet.

Small meal suggestions to take you through the week

Monday

Breakfast: Bowl of porridge with fortified milk and honey

Mid-morning snack:
High fat fruit yoghurt

Lunch: Bowl of soup with added fortified milk, double cream or cheese

Mid-afternoon snack:
Cheese and biscuits

Evening meal:
One slice of quiche with a salad

Drink: Cup of hot chocolate

Friday

Breakfast: Scrambled eggs made with full fat milk and a slice of toast

Mid-morning snack: Chocolate or custard biscuits with a milky drink

Lunch: Small Ploughman's lunch

Mid-afternoon snack:
One small slice of fruit loaf

Evening meal: Small bowl of jerk chicken with rice and peas

Drink: Cup of Horlicks made with full fat milk

Tuesday

Breakfast:
One slice of cheese on toast

Mid-morning snack:
One scone with butter and jam

Lunch: One slice of toast with a fried or poached egg

Mid-afternoon snack:
Small bowl of tinned fruit with custard

Evening meal:
Small chicken curry with coconut rice

Drink: Fruit yoghurt milkshake

Saturday

Breakfast:
One slice of cheese on toast

Mid-morning snack: Bread sticks with a cheese and chive dip

Lunch: One sausage roll

Mid-afternoon snack: Small bowl of meringue with fruit and cream

Evening meal: Small bowl of bacon and broccoli pasta bake with salad

Drink: Fruit smoothie with full fat milk, yogurt and honey

Our meal planner is full of small meal and snack ideas for the whole week. If you are diabetic or on another special diet, please check with your GP before making any changes to your diet.

Wednesday

Breakfast: One buttered slice of toast with a boiled egg

Mid-morning snack: Flapjack

Lunch: Tuna-mayonnaise sandwich

Mid-afternoon snack:
One small slice of chocolate cake

Evening meal: One small jacket potato with butter and cheese

Drink: Cup of Ovaltine made with full fat milk

Thursday

Breakfast: Banana pancake made with full fat milk

Mid-morning snack:
One crumpet with butter

Lunch: One samosa (meat or veg)

Mid-afternoon snack: Canned rice pudding mixed with fortified milk

Evening meal: Cheese omelette made with full fat milk

Drink: Warm full fat milk with honey

Sunday

Breakfast: One wheat biscuit (cereal) with fortified milk

Mid-morning snack: One slice of toast with cheese and beans

Lunch: Sweet potato wedges with a hummus dip

Mid-afternoon snack:
One scoop of ice cream

Evening meal: Small bowl of chicken fried rice

Drink: Full fat fruit milkshake



Recipe suggestions

If a special diet needs to be considered, please consult your GP or a dietitian.

Fortified (enriched) Milk

Add fortified milk to hot drinks, cereals, porridge, milkshakes, custards and puddings.

It increases the energy and protein of the milk without adding volume and takes minutes to prepare. The recipe below is enough to be used throughout the day.

Mix the ingredients below:

- » One pint of full fat milk
- » Four tablespoons of milk powder

Banana Milkshake

Blend the ingredients below for a tasty and nutritious drink.

- » One banana
- » One scoop of vanilla ice cream
- » One cup of fortified milk
- » One teaspoon of honey





Ham and Sweetcorn Macaroni Cheese

This is a quick and easy dish to make and the ham can be replaced with cooked chicken if preferred.

To make this dish, you need:

- » 150g/5oz macaroni
- » 60g/2oz cream cheese
- » 1/3 cup/75ml of full fat milk
- » 70g/2.5oz grated full fat cheese
- » 100g/3.5oz sweetcorn, drained
- » 70g/2.5oz ham cut into cubes

Method:

- » Preheat oven to 190°C or gas mark five
- » Cook the macaroni according to the instructions
- » Mix the cream cheese, milk and half the cheese together
- » Drain the pasta and return to pan
- » Mix the cream cheese mixture, sweetcorn and ham
- » Pour the mixture into a greased ovenproof dish and sprinkle the remaining cheese on top
- » Bake for 15 minutes or until golden

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Cooking time: 15 minutes

Servings: Two



In a care home or hospital

People in care homes and hospitals can expect to get the food and drink they need to meet their dietary needs. This is a standard set by the Care Quality Commission.

If you're in a care home or hospital and if you're worried about losing weight, raise your concerns with the Care Home Manager, Ward Manager or GP in charge of your care. You may find it helpful to ask a friend or relative to support you.

Let the person in charge of your care know if:

- » You need help to eat or drink.
- » Food that is being served is not what you like or need.
- » You want to be weighed regularly and have your weight monitored.



Jean's story

"I had put on weight over a number of years, so I put myself on a diet. I had gone from a size 16 to a size 14 – I was really pleased with myself!

Then my husband died. I just didn't feel like eating anymore, I lost my appetite. I hadn't noticed my weight loss, but my daughter thought that I was losing too much and pestered me to go to the doctors.

He suggested that I eat small meals throughout the day and gave me a leaflet with some tips on what to eat and drink. My daughter has been really supportive too – she pops round for dinner a few times a week. It's good to have the company.

I've stopped losing weight now and feel much stronger and better in myself."



Useful contact details

As well as your GP, Practice or District Nurse, the below organisations can provide you with more support and advice.

Age UK

Advice, information and services for people in later life.

T: 0800 169 65 65

Freephone. Lines are open seven days a week from 8am to 7pm.

www.ageuk.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care

Counselling and advice service for bereaved people that offers information and practical support.

T: 0844 477 9400

E: helpline@cruse.org.uk

www.cruse.org.uk

Royal Voluntary Service

Offers a range of services including home visits, social clubs, help with shopping, community transport and meals delivered to your home.

T: 0845 608 0122

www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk

www.smallappetite.org.uk

Malnutrition Task Force was set up by Age UK, apetito, Bapen, Nutricia and Royal Voluntary Service in 2012 to reduce malnutrition in later life. Production date: February 2014.

