

# Eating enough in later life

Advice for carers





## Keeping to a healthy weight is important in later life

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

**If you have noticed a smaller appetite and weight loss (gradual or rapid) in an older person you care for, it's time to act.** Significant, unintended weight loss can have serious health consequences.

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**Undernutrition affects one million people over the age of 65.**

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Undernutrition affects one million people over the age of 65, increases the risk of ill health and infections and can result in a longer recovery time from surgery and illness.

This leaflet will help you spot the signs that an older person you care for isn't maintaining a healthy weight. It will also provide advice on how to take action, meal suggestions and information on organisations that can support you.



# Signs of unhealthy weight loss



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**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.**

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There may be a medical reason behind unplanned, rapid weight loss and having a poor appetite, so if you notice a rapid weight loss or a steady weight loss over time, it is important that you encourage the person you care for to visit their GP.

It is important that the person you care for eats well in later life, and a diet high in energy and protein might be appropriate. Speak to a GP who will be able to advise you on the best course of action.

There are a number of reasons why people might lose weight when they get older. Weight loss can be associated with a poor diet, ill-fitting dentures or poor oral health and swallowing difficulties, memory problems, depression and loneliness.

Our sense of taste lessens with age and medicines can alter the taste of food – this can also contribute to a loss of interest in food.

Weight loss may be gradual, over a period of time, or immediate after a life event such as a bereavement. Some signs, such as loose fitting clothes, may be obvious, however there are other signs to look out for:

## Have you noticed?

- » A loss of appetite
- » Jewellery slipping off or becoming looser
- » The person you care for needing to tighten their belt buckle an extra notch
- » Changes in mood
- » Frequent colds or infections
- » Loose dentures, difficulty eating or other oral problems
- » A lack of food, or food that has gone uneaten in the cupboard or fridge
- » Tiredness or lethargy
- » Difficulty keeping warm
- » Dizziness

## **If you're concerned about the weight of an older person:**

- » Encourage a visit to their GP to rule out any serious illness and offer to go with them. If they need specialist dietary advice or have difficulty swallowing, their GP can arrange for them to see a dietitian or speech and language therapist.
- » Plan visits around mealtimes so you can eat with them, and encourage them to eat.
- » Make food smell and look appealing. The aroma of cooking can stimulate the appetite.
- » If they can't face a large meal, encourage them to eat small meals and snacks throughout the day – the meal planner in the centre of this leaflet has ideas for meals and snacks to eat throughout the week.
- » If their eyesight isn't good, try using a blue coloured plate – this helps people to see what they are eating.
- » Try adding extra nutrition to meals and snacks (see page 6). Always check with a GP or dietitian before changing their diet.
- » Introduce a regular snack around a favourite TV programme.
- » Suggest an outing to a local café with you or that they go with a friend.



## **What you can do**

It may be difficult to discuss weight loss with the person you care for. If this is the case, you could start by discussing food and eating broadly – what do they like eating? Is there a particular meal or snack they really enjoy, or an occasion they remember eating a tasty meal?

Remind them of the importance of eating and drinking to feel and stay well.

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**Always check with a GP or a dietitian before making changes to a loved one's diet.**

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- » If you do the shopping, draw up the shopping list together. If they have difficulty opening items, make sure to pick up items that are easy to open.
- » If you can't help with the shopping, look into online shopping.
- » Find out what support local voluntary organisations can offer to older people who have difficulty shopping or are lonely.
- » If they have difficulty chewing, try soft foods such as scrambled eggs, but suggest they visit the dentist.
- » If they have a care worker that prepares their meals, ensure the care worker is aware of the previous suggestions and that your loved one's requirements are in the care plan.
- » Ask them to check their weight regularly and if they can't, offer to help them.
- » Losing weight may also be a sign that they aren't coping as well as they would like. If this is the case, you may need to discuss and consider contacting social services to find out how they can help.



## Easy ways to add extra nutrition to small meals



**Much advice around healthy eating recommends low fat foods, because it is aimed at people who should avoid putting on weight. This advice does not apply to older people who are losing weight.**

It is recommended that people who are losing weight eat food that is high in energy to gain weight. Full fat milk and cheese added to meals increases their energy and protein content. They are also good sources of calcium, which is essential to keep bones healthy.

If the person you care for has heart disease, diabetes or another long-term illness, their GP will be able to advise on the best foods to eat.

It's also important to include small portions of fruit and vegetables every day to keep a balanced diet.

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**Six small meals are just as good as three main meals.**

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### 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. Try adding fortified milk to milky drinks (see our recipe on page 7).

**If the person you care for is diabetic, do not add extra sugar or honey to meals or drinks. Always check with their GP when making changes to your loved one's diet.**

## Recipe suggestions

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

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### 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



# 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

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## 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

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## 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



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Our meal planner is full of small meal and snack ideas for the whole week. Always check with a GP before making any changes to a diet.

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### 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 yogurt dip

**Mid-afternoon snack:**  
One scoop of ice cream

**Evening meal:** Small bowl of chicken fried rice

**Drink:** Full fat fruit milkshake



## Recipe suggestion



### Bacon & Broccoli Pasta Bake

This is an easy dish to prepare, and you can freeze any left overs to eat on another day. The bacon can be replaced with cooked chicken if this is preferred.

#### To make this dish, you need:

- » 150g/5oz pasta
- » One teaspoon of olive oil
- » Two chopped bacon rashers
- » ½ small onion, chopped
- » 175g/6oz broccoli (chop into florets)
- » ½ cup/125ml of double cream
- » One egg
- » 70g/2.5oz grated full fat cheese

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

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#### Method:

- » Preheat the oven to 180°C or gas mark four
- » Cook the pasta according to the instructions
- » Heat oil in a pan, add the bacon and onion and cook until slightly brown
- » Cook the broccoli in simmering water until tender
- » Drain the pasta and return to pan
- » Mix the cream and egg together
- » Stir the bacon, onion, broccoli, cream and most of the cheese into the pasta
- » Pour into a shallow ovenproof dish and sprinkle the remaining cheese on top
- » Bake for 20 minute or until golden

**Preparation time:** 20 minutes

**Cooking time:** 20 minutes

**Servings:** Two



# In a care or hospital setting

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 your relative or friend is in a care home or hospital, and you're worried about their weight loss, raise your concerns with the Ward Manager, Care Home Manager, or the GP in charge of their care.**

**You can:**

- » Download the Care Quality Commission's advice on the standards for care homes and hospitals from [www.cqc.org.uk](http://www.cqc.org.uk). Click on 'The National Standards'.
- » Enquire as to whether, and how often, they have been weighed.
- » Ask what the care plan is to tackle the weight loss and how they will monitor progress.



- » Ask how many meals and drinks they get a day and if they are checking how much is being eaten/drunk. Ask if snacks are available and what happens if they miss a meal.
- » Ask staff if you can be there to help at mealtimes, and plan your visits around mealtimes.
- » If you know they need help, ask if they are receiving assistance at mealtimes, or whether the food and drink is placed within reach.
- » In a care home, discuss the menu cycle and let staff know what your loved one enjoys eating. Highlight anything that isn't appropriate.
- » In a hospital, check that your loved one is able to read the menu and fill in the order. Ask to see the menus to ensure that foods they enjoy and can eat are available.
- » At the end of a hospital stay, ensure their discharge care plan specifies how eating well will continue to be supported and followed up.

## Gwyneth's story

*"We noticed mum was losing weight before my dad died. She is only 5' 2" and previously had been trying to lose weight. She had gone from a size 16 to a size 14, and had been happy with this, so we didn't really start to be concerned until after dad died, but she continued to lose weight.*

*The GP noticed the weight loss over a year ago. He advised that she should try eating small meals and gave her a leaflet on nutrition. She started to eat small meals throughout the day and we would pop round and eat a meal with her a few times a week.*

*Mum has more energy now and is generally stronger. Having company at mealtimes has been key, but also she is remembering it's important to eat little and often."*

## Contact details

As well as your local health care professionals, the organisations below 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**

### Carers UK

Information and support for carers.  
20 Great Dover St, London SE1 4LX

**T:** 0808 808 77 77

**E:** [advice@carersuk.org](mailto:advice@carersuk.org)

**www.carersuk.org**

### 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](mailto: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, apétito, Bapen, Nutricia and Royal Voluntary Service in 2012 to reduce malnutrition in later life. Production date: February 2014.

