

## Guide to Supporting **GOOD NUTRITION** **FOR FAMILY CARERS**

A balanced diet is important for all of us. It helps us to stay as healthy as we can be. It is particularly important for family carers to get the nutrition they need to support them to stay well and sustain their caring routine.


This booklet was developed to give an introduction to good nutrition and how to build a healthier, more balanced diet for you and the person you are caring for.



### 1 WHAT IS GOOD NUTRITION?

Foods are made up of nutrients: carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals and water. These nutrients are present in different types of foods. Our bodies need the right mix of nutrients to be healthy and well.

The Food Pyramid is a guide to what, and how much, of the different food groups we should eat to achieve a healthy balanced diet.

**Healthy Food for Life** [www.healthyireland.ie](http://www.healthyireland.ie) 

### The Food Pyramid

For adults, teenagers and children aged five and over

**NOT every day** **Maximum once or twice a week**

**Foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt**

**Fats, spreads and oils** (In very small amounts)

**Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts** (2 Servings a day)

**Milk, yogurt and cheese** (3 Servings a day) *5 for children age 9-12 and teenagers age 13-18*

**Wholemeal cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice** (3-5 Servings a day) *Up to 7\* for teenage boys and men age 19-50*

**Vegetables, salad and fruit** (5-7 Servings a day)

*\*Daily Servings Guide – wholemeal cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice*

Active	Daily Servings				Inactive	Daily Servings			
	Child (5-12)	Teenager (13-18)	Adult (19-50)	Adult (51+)		Teenager (13-18)	Adult (19-50)	Adult (51+)	
♂	3-4	4	4-5	3-4	3	3-4	3		
♀	3-5	5-7	5-7	4-5	4-5	4-6	4		

Drink at least 8 cups of fluid a day – water is best

**Get Active!** To maintain a healthy weight adults need at least 30 minutes a day of moderate activity on 5 days a week (or 150 minutes a week); children need to be active at a moderate to vigorous level for at least 60 minutes every day.

Source: Department of Health, December 2016.



When building a healthy diet, remember:

- Start with small changes:** Build towards a healthier diet rather than trying to do it all in one go.
- Establish a regular eating pattern:** Avoid skipping meals and cook in bulk. You can freeze portions to save time on days when you're running tight on time.
- Increase fruit and veg:** Challenge yourself to 'eat a rainbow' and eat fruit and veg with lots of different colours each week. Frozen fruit/veg are handy options.
- Stay hydrated:** Drink plenty of fluids, aim for 8-10 cups per day. Water, low-fat milk and sugar-free cordials all contribute to fluid intake. Tea and coffee contribute also but shouldn't be relied upon.
- Gradually increase fibre intake:** Choose wholemeal and wholegrain bread, cereals, rice and pasta.
- Reduce salt and sugar intake:** Choose foods and drinks with less saturated fat, salt (sodium), and added sugars.
- Vitamin D:** Many people in Ireland are deficient in vitamin D. From March to September, our bodies can make vitamin D from 10-15 minutes of direct sun exposure. Try to include sources of vitamin D in your diet. Dietary sources include oily fish (such as salmon or trout), eggs and foods with added vitamin D (e.g. fortified cereals or fortified milk/dairy products). If you are concerned about your vitamin D intake and are thinking of taking a supplement, speak to your doctor/dietitian first about the right dose for you.

You can find the healthy eating guidelines and resources published by the HSE, by going to <https://www.hse.ie> and typing "healthy eating" guidelines in the search bar.

### 2 SUPPORTING GOOD NUTRITION IN THE PERSON YOU ARE CARING FOR

Knowing what type of foods and drinks make up a healthy balanced diet is the first step in ensuring the person you care for is receiving all the nutrition they need. Here are some other factors you may need to consider when supporting the person you care for around food and nutrition:

- Sensory Issues:** Taste, texture, smell and the look of food can impact mealtime experience and a person's relationship with food. Consider sensory issues when preparing meals and snacks.
- Environment:** A relaxed, social setting for meals will support better nutrition and can make mealtimes more enjoyable for you and the person you are caring for. It is important not to rush meals, particularly for a person who has problems chewing or swallowing. Make sure lighting is sufficient and that the room isn't too noisy.
- Visual Cues:** A person with a cognitive impairment

such as dementia may forget to eat, or not respond to their body's hunger cues. Having snacks and drinks available where they are likely to be seen, or offering food/drinks regularly can help remind someone to eat.

- Age:** Our sense of taste and smell decline as we age, which may also impact on the person's experience of eating and drinking.
- Illness:** Certain illnesses will impact on a person's appetite or ability to eat and drink e.g. oesophageal cancers may affect a person's ability to chew, swallow and digest food.
- Appropriate Posture:** Adapted cutlery and utensils can support independence in eating and drinking. Consider whether support is needed to help someone retain an upright posture when eating/drinking.
- Oral Hygiene:** Good oral hygiene, including ensuring dentures are well fitted and maintained also supports good nutrition.

### 3 WHAT FOOD TO OFFER THE PERSON YOU ARE CARING FOR

It is important to look at the type of food you are offering, and to be open to experimenting with taste, smell and texture of different foods.

People who are very sensitive to smells and taste may prefer bland food, and may find strong smells overpowering. Those with an under-sensitivity to taste or smell may prefer stronger flavours. Try a range of different flavours to help find those foods that give most pleasure to the person you are caring for.

Experiment with the texture of food. Offering a range of different textures and shapes during a meal may help improve the person's sensory experience.

There is often trial and error involved in establishing a healthy eating routine. It is important to be patient with this process. Involving the person you are caring for in decisions around mealtimes, food choices and meal preparation can support the process.



## 4 COMMON CHALLENGES

Some of the most common challenges when supporting good nutrition for the person you are caring for include swallowing difficulties, dehydration, constipation and oral care.

### Swallowing Difficulties

Dysphagia is the medical term for swallowing difficulties. Some people with dysphagia have problems swallowing certain foods/liquids, while others can't swallow at all. Sudden neurological damage (e.g. as a result of a stroke or brain/spinal cord injury) can affect the ability to swallow. Dysphagia can be common in people with disorders such as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease or those with learning disabilities or dementia. Some people with dysphagia may require the texture of their food and drinks to be modified in order to support a safer swallow.

When food or liquid is swallowed "down the wrong way" it can enter the airways and result in aspiration pneumonia – an infection caused by the bacteria from food/liquid which has entered the lungs. Some people may show physical signs that something has gone down the wrong way, while others may not show clear signs of aspiration ("silent aspiration"). It is important to be aware of the symptoms of dysphagia and to speak to a GP if you have any concerns about the person that you are caring for.

Malnutrition and dehydration are common in those with dysphagia. See sections below on dehydration and unintentional weight loss for more information.

**Signs & symptoms** to help identify dysphagia - ask yourself 'Does the person I am caring for experience':

- Difficulty swallowing?
- Frequent coughing/choking when eating/drinking?
- Change in voice (wet, "gurgly" speech)?
- Frequent heartburn?
- Frequent throat clearing?
- Severe discomfort or pain while swallowing?
- Sensation of food getting stuck in the throat or chest?
- Regurgitation of food, sometimes through the nose? Food in the nose?
- Frequent drooling?
- Hoarseness?
- Changes in eating habits (eating more slowly, avoiding meals or holding food in the mouth)?
- Continuous chewing?
- Leaving hard foods (e.g. hard vegetables) on the plate?

**Supporting a person with swallowing difficulties:**

- If you suspect the person has dysphagia make an appointment with their GP who will refer to a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) and Dietitian as needed.
- An SLT can diagnose dysphagia and provide a safe care plan based on the individual assessment. This plan may involve modifying the texture of food and drink taken by the person or introducing swallow therapy.
- A dietitian can help ensure that the person you are caring for has a well-balanced diet and is getting the nutrition they need. Meeting nutritional needs can be more difficult on a texture modified diet. A dietitian will be able to support you and the person you are caring to meet nutritional needs.
- A physiotherapist and/or an occupational therapist can give guidance on positioning techniques, and aids for eating and drinking.
- In some cases, the medical team (including the Dietitian, SLT and Doctor) may recommend the insertion of a feeding tube.

### Dehydration

Poor fluid intake and swallowing problems can increase the risk of dehydration. Prolonged diarrhoea or vomiting can lead to dehydration. Some medications (such as diuretics or laxatives) may also increase fluid losses.

Being well-hydrated is important for normal functioning. Poor hydration may result in headaches, dry mouth, lethargy, dizziness or poor concentration. Prolonged dehydration can worsen constipation or lead to other complications, such as frequent urinary tract infections. Try not to wait until a person is feeling thirsty before thinking about hydration. By the time they are feeling thirsty, they may already be dehydrated.

**Ask yourself the following questions to help identify signs of mild dehydration:**

- Has the skin and insides of the mouth, nose, and eyelids become dry?
- Have they become more confused and sluggish?
- Do they appear more tired than usual?

**Ask yourself the following questions to help identify signs of severe dehydration:**

- Does standing up make them feel light-headed or have they fainted/near-fainted recently?
- Are they urinating less frequently (fewer than 4 times per day) and only producing small amounts of urine?
- Is their urine dark yellow and strong smelling?
- Do they have a headache, fever or appear confused?
- Are they constipated?

### Constipation

Constipation is often described as having fewer than three bowel movements a week. Chronic constipation is infrequent bowel movements or difficult passage of stools that persists for several weeks or longer. Diarrhoea can sometimes mask the issue of constipation ("overflow diarrhoea"). This happens when constipation causes a blockage in your bowel and watery stool leaks around the block. It is important to keep an eye on changes in bowel habits. If someone you care for had severe constipation followed by diarrhoea, talk to their doctor before giving medication for constipation or diarrhoea.

Though occasional constipation is common, some people experience chronic constipation that can impact on their appetite or interfere with their ability to go about daily tasks.

**To help identify signs of constipation**, ask yourself 'Is the person I care for':

- Straining to have bowel movements?
- Passing stools less often?
- Passing fewer than three stools a week?
- Producing hard or lumpy stools?
- Experiencing a change in stool consistency?
- Having incomplete bowel movements?

**Tips to prevent dehydration and constipation:**

- Encourage the person you are caring for to drink frequently. Aim for 8-10 glasses of fluid per day (e.g. water, milk, sugar-free cordial, soup).
- Establish schedules for gradually increasing fluid intake.
- Increase the daily intake of fibre gradually by increasing fruits, veg and other whole grains in the diet.
- Exercise can also help maintain regularity. If sweating occurs, the person needs to increase fluid intake to prevent dehydration.
- Make an appointment to see the GP if the person you are caring for experiences unexplained and persistent changes in their bowel habits.



### Unexplained or Unintentional Weight Loss

It is important not to ignore signs of unexplained or unintended weight loss. Although small changes in weight are normal, ongoing unexplained or unintentional weight loss should be flagged with a doctor or dietitian. Unintentional weight loss can lead to problems including reduced strength and independence, as well as impaired immunity. Nutritional deficiencies may also occur if a person is not meeting their nutritional needs.

Monthly weight checks allow you to monitor weight changes.

**To help identify signs of weight loss**, ask yourself 'Has the person I care for':

- Had unintentional weight loss, particularly over the last 3 months?
- Experienced clothes, belts and/or rings becoming looser?
- Started eating less than normal?
- Had changes to their appetite or their interest in food which have been negatively impacting on their food and/or fluid intake?
- Started feeling full after smaller amounts of food than normal?
- Been experiencing symptoms like nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea or constipation?

**Tips if the person you are caring for has unintentional weight loss:**

- Speak to their doctor or dietitian.
- Try offering little amounts of food often in the day (aim for 3 small meals per day, with snacks in between).
- Avoid overfilling the plate as this may be off-putting.
- Avoid low-fat or diet foods at this time (unless otherwise advised).
- Offer foods with stronger flavours to help tempt appetite.
- Nourishing drinks (such as full fat milk, hot chocolate made on milk, etc.) are a good way to get in some extra energy and protein.
- The doctor or dietitian may recommend an oral nutritional supplement (ONS) to help optimise nutritional intake or help manage unintentional weight loss. ONS are drinks containing a concentrated source of protein, energy, vitamins and minerals to suit individual preferences. ONS should be taken in addition to meals and snacks (not as a replacement). Always follow your doctor/dietitian's advice on ONS.

### Oral Care

Oral (mouth) care is about looking after our teeth (including dentures), gums, mouth and lips. Good oral care is important for ensuring the person can enjoy the experience of eating without pain or discomfort.

**To help identify poor oral health in the person you are caring for** ask yourself 'Has the person I am caring for':

- Developed bad breath (halitosis)
- Difficulty chewing food
- A constant thirst
- Dry lips

**Tips for supporting good oral health:**

- If the person has a good oral health routine and has developed any of the above difficulties, speak to their GP.
- If the person wears dentures, check with your dentist that they fit correctly.
- Encourage continued independence for people who are able to manage their own oral care. If assistance is needed, first explain what you are going to do and ensure you have privacy.
- Use a soft toothbrush to clean teeth. Gently clean the tongue with the brush.
- Encourage regular daily mouth care – every morning, evening and after meals.
- Regular dental check-ups.

## 5 ABOUT US

### Family Carers Ireland

is the national charity dedicated to supporting the

**355,000+** FAMILY CARERS

across Ireland who dedicate their lives to caring for their loved ones, including children and adults with physical or intellectual disability, frail older people, those with palliative care needs and people living with chronic illness or addiction and mental health issues.



### Looking After Yourself

It is vital that you, as a family carer, also get the support you need. Family Carers Ireland has a range of practical supports in place including education, training, respite, counselling and advocacy, we also offer full wellbeing reviews for family carers, advice around rights and entitlements and peer support groups.

To find out more about Family Carers Ireland, please visit [www.familycarers.ie](http://www.familycarers.ie).