

Malnutrition and Weight Maintenance with Alzheimer's Disease

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Malnutrition and problems with weight maintenance are often an issue for those with Alzheimer's disease. Over the past few decades, a number of studies have systematically observed weight loss in patients with dementia and, in particular, Alzheimer's disease. In addition, changes in the severity of dementia correlate significantly with the degree of weight loss. In this article we address the nutritional essentials of maintaining a "healthy brain" and the challenges faced by a person with Alzheimer's disease.

Research suggests that adopting a "brain-healthy" diet can possibly reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease. A diet that avoids saturated fat and cholesterol and includes dark-skinned fruits and vegetables with high levels of naturally occurring antioxidants (eggplant, red bell peppers, beets, broccoli, spinach, brussels sprouts, red grapes, cherries, oranges, and all kinds of berries, etc.) have been shown to decrease the risk of developing Alzheimer's. In addition, foods which contain omega-3 fatty acids (coldwater fish, tuna, mackerel, anchovies, trout, herring, salmon, sardines, and whitefish) and green leafy vegetables are also associated with decrease risk. Supplements such as vitamins B-12 and folate may also help maintain brain volume and integrity.

Malnutrition in Alzheimer's disease may be related to a variety of reasons such as a diminished sense of hunger and thirst, problems swallowing, difficulty using utensils or inability to self-feed, poor food choices, and the presence of other diseases or conditions such as coexistent depression. At the onset of the disease, there is often a decline in nutritional status associated with a change in food intake due to reduced functional capacity. In severe stages of the disease, many patients avoid or fail to accept offered nutrition through various behaviors that prevent food from entering the mouth or by failing to chew or swallow.

While there is no requisite specific diet for individuals with Alzheimer's disease -- unless they have another condition, such as high blood pressure or diabetes mellitus, that may require a particular diet -- eating a well-balanced, nutritious diet is extremely beneficial. Recently, nutrition experts from Washington University reviewed our Parc Provence diet and found it to be of very high quality, meeting or exceeding the Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA's) of important nutrients and vitamins.

The basics of nutrition include: eating a balanced diet with a variety of foods from each food group; maintaining a healthy weight with a good balance of exercise and food intake; limiting foods with high saturated fat and cholesterol; cutting down on excessive sugar intake and limiting foods with high sodium; staying well hydrated; preventing constipation by eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Various strategies have been employed to maintain a healthy weight in Alzheimer's disease:

- Eating smaller meals or snacks more frequently may be easier than eating the same amount of food in three meals.
- Taking a daily multivitamin/mineral supplement.
- Eating the more nutritious, higher-calorie foods in the meal first.
- Making meals enjoyable. Eating with others may encourage better intake.

- Recommending a special diet or certain foods to make it easier to eat in those with swallowing problems.
- Maintaining good oral care.
- In those that have a problem using particular utensils or dishes, choosing a different utensil or dish that is easier to handle may be beneficial.
- Staying physically active can stimulate appetite.

With Alzheimer's, the body's signal for thirst may also be impaired. In addition, some medications can contribute to dry mouth. Besides drinking water, other ways to relieve dry mouth or increase fluids include: dunking breads, toast, cookies, or crackers in milk, hot chocolate, or tea to soften them; taking a drink after each bite of food to moisten the mouth and to help swallowing; adding broth or sauces to foods to make them softer and moister; eating sour candy or fruit ice to help increase saliva; properly treating symptoms of depression as poor appetite and weight changes can also be symptoms of depression.