

Busting the Myths About Nutrition and Hydration in RAC

MYTH: Older people need the same types of foods as the younger population

Older people need MORE nutrients relative to the amount of the food they eat. This is because the actual amount of the nutrients needed is the same or higher than younger people, but the amount of energy they need is less, so the food needs to be more “concentrated”.

MYTH: The best types of meals are meats and vegetables

The best types of meals are those that are eaten. So meals need to be tailored to the needs of the residents. Nourishing thick soups and desserts can be made that have more nutrients than more traditional main meals. We know that the vegetables that are served with traditional meals are often not eaten so alternative ways of providing the nutrients in vegetables are important. A meal of nourishing soup, sandwiches and a milk-based dessert can be better than more formal meals.

MYTH: Snacking between meals is unnecessary

Elderly people often have poorer appetites which is one of the main reasons they become malnourished. The ‘grazing’ pattern is therefore really important in managing this. However, this means that the snack foods should be high energy and high in nutrients, and not just dry or plain biscuits. Sandwiches, cakes, muffins, pikelets, chocolates, bananas, yogurt, cheese, milk drinks and ice cream make good snacks for older people.

MYTH: A low fat diet is the goal for all people in Australia as we eat too much fat

High fat diets, especially high saturated fats, are associated with heart disease and weight gain. For people under the age of 70 who are fit and well, reducing the fat in the diet is an important goal. However, for people in residential aged care and more elderly people in general, chronic disease prevention is not a priority. Preventing malnutrition is the nutritional priority as good nutritional status is associated with best quality of life. Low fat meals are usually bulkier and larger in size to meet the nutritional needs, and while this is useful for those managing weight, it is not appropriate for the high energy, high protein, small meals needed for older people.

MYTH: Weight loss is the first goal for those residents who fall in the overweight category

There is a difference between being overweight and obese. In the elderly, because they have usually lost height, the body mass index (BMI) is measured differently. So if a person stayed the same weight all their life, their BMI would rise as they lost height. That is why the BMI targets are higher for the elderly. Weight loss should not be the goal for anyone in residential aged care unless their BMI is very high (above 35), and then only after dietetic consultation to ensure that it is appropriate. Weight loss diets lead to a loss of muscle – this cannot be helped. In the well population this can be minimised by exercise but in the sedentary it can be dangerous. Losing muscle rather than fat weakens the person further and accelerates the development of malnutrition. It also contributes to falls and an inability to fight off infections such as colds and flus.

MYTH: People with diabetes should avoid sugar

There are several forms of diabetes, but as one gets older, the more common variant is non-insulin dependent. In older people the prevalence of diabetes increases but with increasing age, long-term effects become less of a priority and it can be managed more leniently. The evidence is that all persons with diabetes can include sugar in their diet, and for older people, the less emphasis there needs to be on specifics within the diet. The key to good control is spreading the carbohydrates (starches and sugars) out throughout the day. There is no need to avoid foods such as fruit, milks, plain cake, breads, potatoes, rice and the like, but it is not a very good idea to have just sugars between meals, for example, cordials, soft drinks and juices as these make the blood sugar rise more quickly. If they are included then they should be with other foods that will slow down the absorption of the sugar.