

Malnutrition Factsheet

What is malnutrition?

Malnutrition occurs when a person's diet does not meet their nutritional needs. At Eat Well Age Well, we are concerned with undernutrition, i.e. malnutrition due to undernourishment.

Malnutrition is a key public health problem that has a significant impact on individuals health & wellbeing, costing the NHS billions per year.

Malnutrition is a silent and hidden issue, there is low awareness by the public and health professionals.

How many older people in Scotland are affected by malnutrition?

Malnutrition in the community in Scotland is not routinely measured, therefore the true extent of the problem is unknown. Data from the UK Malnutrition Task Force estimates that 1 in 10 people living in the UK today are malnourished, or at risk of being malnourished (1), and we can estimate for Scotland based on population data that there are approx. 103,000 older people living in Scotland who have malnutrition, or who are affected by malnutrition (2). These figures are only going to worsen with an ageing population.

At Eat Well Age Well we are partnering with Glasgow University to conduct Scottish research during 2019 to provide more evidence and Scottish statistics on the prevalence of older people living with malnutrition, or at risk of malnutrition.

What are the signs & symptoms of malnutrition?

It can be difficult to recognise the signs of malnutrition as malnutrition can happen very gradually. Some of the symptoms and signs to look out for include:

- low weight/a body mass index (BMI) under 18.5kg/m^2 ;
- unintentional weight loss;
- poor appetite and/or eating less than usual;
- loose clothing, jewellery or dentures;
- loss in muscle strength or having a recent fall;
- becoming ill often



What are the consequences of having malnutrition?

Malnutrition can affect every system in the body. Malnourished people:

- are twice as likely to visit a GP (3);
- are at higher risk of hospital admissions (3);
- have a greater number of health issues (3).
- have reduced energy levels and ability to work, shop, cook and self-care;
- have an increased risk of
 - infections (e.g. chest infections),
 - pressure ulcers
 - falls
 - muscle wasting and weakness

Who is at risk of malnutrition?

Older people are at higher risk of malnutrition than younger people and at Eat Well Age Well our focus is on older people aged 65 years and over.

Older people living at home are at risk of becoming malnourished due to a variety of reasons:

- decreased sense of taste and smell
- poor appetite
- dental problems—pain in the mouth/ dentures when eating or swallowing
- living alone, particularly if a person feels isolated or lonely/or not having anyone to share mealtimes with
- disability, immobility and lack of transport—not being able to get to the shops
- sight issues
- food poverty— not having enough money to buy food
- lacking motivation, perhaps due to depression

What can you do to prevent weight loss?

A balanced diet is essential for health and wellbeing. When someone has a poor appetite or are malnourished they should try to fortify their meals and drinks with high protein or high calories foods—here are some ideas:

- using full fat milk or cream in your teas, coffees, soups and puddings, or using them in milkshakes;
- whisking in dried, skimmed milk powder into a pint of the milk that you use;
- adding knobs of butter or margarine, or cream, to potatoes or other vegetables, such as carrots;
- sprinkling grated cheese on, or adding creamy sauces to, meals such as spaghetti, baked potatoes



- adding high protein foods, such as cooked meats, fish, beans and lentils to soups, sauces and stews;
- mixing chopped nuts, dried fruit, and honey with, cereals, puddings, desserts or porridge; and
- adding mayonnaise salad cream or dressings to salads and sandwiches.

Finally, stay as active as you can, to increase your appetite.



References

1. Malnutrition Task Force (2013) A review and summary of the impact of malnutrition in older people and the reported costs and benefits of interventions (Available from <http://www.malnutritiontaskforce.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/A-review-and-summary-of-the-impact-of-malnutrition-in-older-people-and-the-reported-costs-and-benefits-of-interventions.pdf>)
2. National Records Scotland (2018) Scotland's Population 2017 (Available from <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/news/2017/scotlands-population-is-increasing>)
3. Malnutrition Task Force (2017) State of the Nation—Older People and Malnutrition in the UK today (Available from <http://www.malnutritiontaskforce.org.uk/resources/stateofthenation/>)