

Basic Considerations in the Nutrition of the Elderly

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Background

All individuals, from infancy to the end of life, are recommended to practice a healthy lifestyle which involves adapted sound nutrition practices and being physically active. Such a recommendation is of benefit to both individuals and for the society-at-large. Luckily, nutrition is the most modifiable factor for our survival among the other two main factors involved, genetics and the environment. Thus, nutrition plays a significant role in keeping individuals healthy and productive. Economic benefits to having a high percentage of healthy people in society involve sparing the cost of medical care expenses.

Among segments of society is that which includes those who have advanced in age. There are many descriptions and nomenclatures for this segment, which include: aged, senior citizens, and the elderly. Among cultures of countries and regions of the world, the distinctive age for these individuals varies from 55 to 80 and above years. However, the common consensus is that the definition of the elderly applies to those who are 65 plus years of age.

Because of advances in medicine and medical care services, people are living longer than in past decades and the percentage of the elderly in society is expected to increase. For example, the projection for the elderly population in Italy is to be 25% in 2025 and nearly 36% by the year 2050 in Japan. Such a fact stimulated interest in the health care of the elderly, including that of nutrition research for this segment of society nearly 4 decades ago. Nutrition of the elderly population is a complex issue and requires efforts of many specialties in medical care, in addition to those of nutritionists. This article briefly explores why nutrition of the elderly is not a simple task and draws attention to what needs to be considered in this regard.

Influencing factors

Many factors influence nutrition of elderly people; however, the following are the four main factors:

- 1. Physiological:** this involves the lessening of bodily organs and systems because of the normal processes of advancing in age. For the skeletal system, there can be loss of bone matrix and minerals. Loss of muscle fibers and weakened muscular strength can be manifestations of aging. As for the nervous system, there can be degenerative changes in neurons. Degenerative changes in cardiac muscle, narrowing of arteries and having hypertension could be features of the cardiovascular system of the aged. Some changes in the digestive include: loss of teeth, reduced function of taste buds, decreased intestinal motility, reduced digestive secretions. Effect of aging on the urinary system can be: degenerative changes in kidneys and fewer functional nephrons. As for the endocrine system, reduced hormone secretion and decreased metabolic rate can be results of aging.
- 2. Socio-economic:** The status of the elderly is most likely to be different from that of their younger years. There can be, among others: loss of or reduced income, be living alone, having unsuitable housing conditions, and not having adequate health insurance.
- 3. Psychological:** The elderly may suffer from depression and/or loss of zeal for life all together because of: not having a job, death of spouse, loneliness, not having enough social interactions, not having enough of needed care, and lack of hope for the future.
- 4. Pathological:** Disease conditions influence the nutrition of the elderly, such as: problems with swallowing, diseases of the digestive system, neuronal loss of function and damage – Alzheimer's, paralysis, loss of taste sensation. Onset of disease necessitates administration of medications that may depress appetite or cause other disturbances to the physiology of different systems.

Considerations for nutrition of the elderly

As can be appreciated, nutrition of the elderly is influenced by multi-faceted factors. This represents a challenge to the health care teams of professionals. The main objective in this regard is to ensure healthy nutrition for the elderly – so that their nutritional requirements are met. Such an objective to be achieved would utilize known knowledge and a variety of food guides. As can be realized, the main influencing factors explored herein may lead to malnutrition, due to: insufficient nutrient intake and or imbalanced nutrition that results in nutrient deficiencies. Attempts to offset such influencing factors necessitate collective efforts and examination of individual cases for appropriate interventions.

Ensuring adequate (both quantity and quality) nutrition requires better health care for the elderly, direct involvement of nutritionists/dieticians, local community, and societal support. Alleviation of depression in the elderly is a key to proper nutrition – to enhance the psychological state that helps to improve appetite. Such can be attained by: having family members around, having a pet for companion, living in a community, feeling the support of community and society, and receiving adequate psychiatric care.

Special considerations

There are some general considerations/recommendations for the nutrition of the elderly, which include:

1. Meals ought to be on the soft side and easy to digest – to avoid indigestion.
2. Meals should be of a small size and more frequent during the day.
3. Consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables ought to be encouraged – for satisfying requirements of vitamins and minerals.
4. Intake of sufficient water and liquids should be observed – to maintain proper water balance and to avoid dehydration. Drinking water and other consumed liquids ought to be of high quality and contamination-free.
5. Consumption of whole-grain products is recommended – for having enough fiber in the diet and to avoid having constipation.

Concluding Remarks

The elderly represent a considerable segment of society and such is expected to be increasing. Nutrition of the elderly is multi-faceted - thus, it is complex and requires the attention of nutritionists and other health care professionals. In addition, aged individuals require the attention of: family members, local community, and the society-at-large. The elderly should always be encouraged to remain physically active to the extent possible. Also, all attempts to keep the elderly alert and mentally-engaged should be tried. Attention to nutrition of the elderly should take individuality into account, with special attention to be given to those who are poor, diseased and/or socially-unfortunate. Finally, research on the nutrition of the elderly ought to be given proper attention and enhancement in all countries and regions of the world.

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