

Health

CASTLEMAINE HEALTH

Nutrition: the key to good health

Last week was Nutrition and Hydration Week, an annual international event that aims to promote awareness and increase our understanding of the role nutrition and hydration play in our health and wellbeing, particularly as we age.

Lee Mason, manager of nutrition and dietetics at Castlemaine Health, says we're becoming increasingly aware of how mindful people need to be about what they're eating, especially as they age.

"It's not just about calories, it's about making sure that what we eat has good nutritional value. In particular, there's a lot more research coming out around the importance of protein for older people," Lee says.

Proteins are broken down during digestion to amino acids. Once inside the body, these amino acids are put to work in a range of processes including building new skin, hair, muscle and brain cells. The building of muscle is an important one for older people. Recent studies have shown that an elderly inpatient can lose over 10 per cent of their total lean leg mass after just three days in hospital, regardless of how many calories are being consumed.

"Eating more protein, especially if combined with exercise, has the ability to neutralise this," Lee says.

So how do we get more protein into our diet, especially if we're older? Well, research is showing that our classic eating pattern, where we consume a small amount of protein at breakfast, a moderate amount at lunch and a big chunk at dinner, isn't really working for us.

"You're actually better to spread it across the three meals," Lee says. "The human body can't store protein so eating small amounts frequently is best."

Quality proteins include meat, fish, eggs and dairy products. Secondary sources, like soy-based proteins such as tofu, beans and lentils are great options for vegetarians or vegans.

"We encourage people to look at their diet and lifestyle and then try and come up with some simple solutions. Like trying a tub of yoghurt as a snack rather than reaching for the biscuit tin, or swapping a regular breakfast of toast and cereal with eggs a few times a week."

But what if other health issues prevent you from getting enough protein, or indeed sufficient food of any kind into your diet?

For some older members of our community getting the nutrition they need to maintain good health is affected by age-related changes in the sense of thirst and taste, mobility, vision or swallowing issues.

Swallowing was a key focus of Nutrition and Hydration Week. Speech pathologist Dr Emma McLaughlin says swallowing difficulties, also known as dysphagia, affect more than one million Australians.

"Swallowing deteriorates as we get older, but we usually compensate for it, often not noticing it's a problem until something else happens to impact our health."

When an older person enters hospital, perhaps for an unrelated surgery like a hip replacement, it's quite common for them to also develop swallowing difficulties as a result of muscle loss, the general anaesthetic, other complications or even just being in a different environment.

Problems with swallowing can prevent a patient from absorbing enough nutrients, slowing down their recovery and putting them at



Speech pathologist Dr Emma McLaughlin and manager of nutrition and dietetics at Castlemaine Health, Lee Mason.

risk of more injuries or other serious medical complications. Interestingly, you can lose 80 per cent of your tongue strength and not have a speech problem, but you can develop a swallowing problem after losing only a very small amount.

"It becomes a bit of a vicious cycle during recovery for an older person," Dr McLaughlin says.

"What we now know is that we have to exercise those muscles, just like any other muscle, to keep them conditioned so that patients have the strength, the coordination and the control to be able to swallow safely and efficiently.

"As speech pathologists we'll also recommend different kinds of foods and drinks.

"Trying foods with different textures that are either easier to chew, or easier to control in the throat can make a big difference."

Dysphagia doesn't just occur in hospital so it's worth being aware of the indicators. They include:

- Taking a long time to get through a meal
- Difficulty chewing, particularly things that are more stringy or fibrous
- Coughing or throat clearing, particularly after swallowing
- Feeling like food is getting stuck in the throat
- Unintentional weight loss
- A history of neurological, cardiac or respiratory problems.

If you or anyone you know is concerned about their nutrition or feels they may have a swallowing difficulty the skilled team at Castlemaine Health can help.

Castlemaine Health offers a range of services and employ a team of experts including dietitians, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and social workers.

Whether you need in home help with meal preparation, aides to help make cooking and eating at home easier or a home delivery meal service, they can help. The team can also link you in with other local services.

Q&A

Hydration

Every biochemical process in your body needs water to work efficiently. Not drinking enough is like not putting enough oil in your car; neither your body nor your car is going to run very well.

We lose water through breathing, sweating and digestion so it's important to re-hydrate by drinking fluids and eating foods that contain water. Unfortunately, we don't really have a great sense of thirst, so by the time we feel like we really need a drink we're likely to already be quite dehydrated.

So what are guidelines we should be following to keep adequately hydrated?

Q: How much water should I be drinking?

A: A rule of thumb is 30ml to 35ml per kilo of your ideal body weight. So, if you're a 70kg man, you need about 2150ml. That's about five or six glasses of water a day, regardless of the season.

Q: Does it have to be straight water?

A: You'll get some water value out of tea and coffee (not as much as a glass of water) and from some foods. Herbal teas, mineral or carbonated waters are fine, as long as they're not loaded with sugar.

Sugary drinks on the other hand, whether it's added or naturally occurring like the fructose in fruit juice, counteract hydration. That's why you often still feel thirsty after drinking them.

Your body absorbs sugar in the small intestine through osmosis. Your body has to give up water to enable this process to happen and for your gut to absorb the sugar. So, in effect, the sweet drink is actually dehydrating you.

Q: How can I tell if I'm not drinking enough?

A: Tiredness (without a good explanation), a dry mouth and darker urine are all indicators that you're not drinking enough.

For information and referrals contact:

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Healthy Snack Recipe

Apricot and Almond Bliss Balls

A nutrient-rich snack with approx. 1.9 grams of protein per ball plus vitamin A, vitamin C, good fats, zinc and magnesium.

1 cup moist dried apricots
½ cup almonds or walnuts
1 ½ tablespoons honey
1 cup shredded coconut

Method

Place the almonds, apricots, honey and ¼ cup of the coconut into a blender and blend until combined (if it's not combining add a very small amount of water.) Using wet hands roll tablespoons of the mixture into balls and roll in the remaining coconut. Refrigerate.



Send us your questions or tips about health and wellbeing

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