

---

# 10

## Meeting patients' nutritional needs

We need nutrients to maintain the body's functions and to grow. We need water and carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins and minerals. Every cell in the body needs energy. A person must take in enough calories, in the form of carbohydrates, fats, and proteins, to supply that energy. The body also needs the amino acids found in proteins to build and maintain the structure of the cells and larger tissues. Finally, the body needs vitamins and minerals for metabolism and to regulate the many body processes.

To get the right nutrients for the body, a person needs to eat enough foods and a variety of foods. Foods may be divided into groups. Each group contains some of those nutrients.

Breads, cereals, root crops, rice, beans, lentils and sweet potatoes supply complex carbohydrates for energy, some protein, several vitamins and minerals needed to regulate body processes, and fibre, which helps the bowel to work well.

Vegetables and fruits also supply carbohydrates, and they supply many of the vitamins and minerals, particularly vitamins A and C. Fresh fruits and vegetables also contain fibre.

Meat, poultry, fish, eggs and nuts are the major sources of protein for growth and repair of the body's tissues and to fight infections. They also have B vitamins, some minerals, and some fats.

Milk, yoghurt and cheese also supply protein and some fat as well as vitamins and minerals.

Fats, oils and sweets supply mostly fats and carbohydrates and are very high in calories.

The body's need for water is discussed in the chapter on caring for the patient who has problems with elimination. This chapter suggests ways to care for the patient who has trouble eating enough to nourish the body.



## **Nutritional problems of the hospitalized patient**

An ill person needs more food than a well one, in order to heal and recover. For example, a patient who has had surgery needs a diet which has a lot of vitamin C and protein since these help with healing. Also, proteins are especially important to fight off infection because the antibodies that the body uses to fight infection are proteins. Often people use up their protein reserves when they have surgery or are injured or have an illness with fever. An adequate diet is essential. Many illnesses, however, make it difficult for a person to eat, or make it hard for the person to digest food.

### **Conditions making it difficult to get adequate nutrition**

- A person with a very sore throat may find it hard to swallow food.
- A person who has a stomach problem may be nauseated by food.
- A person who has a fever is likely to have no appetite.
- Patients who are in the hospital are almost always at risk of getting insufficient nutrients either because of their illness or because of the treatment for their illness.

- Many patients are already undernourished when they enter the hospital.
- The food served in the hospital may be different from the food the patient is accustomed to eating. Patients may not like the hospital food.
- Meals may be served at times when the patients are not accustomed to eating and when they do not feel hungry.
- Patients are often put on a special diet in the hospital to help treat their disease (for example, a person who has had a heart problem will usually be put on a low-salt diet). Patients may not like the change in diet.
- The patient's family may live far away so they cannot bring the foods he or she likes, or the family may not know the right foods to bring, or may not be able to afford the right foods.



## **How to meet the nutritional needs of the patient**

To make sure that the people who are seriously ill or who have just had surgery get enough fluid and at least some calories, they may be fed intravenously until they are able to eat. Intravenous therapy is discussed in the chapter on safe administration of medicines. Intravenous fluids provide enough fluid, but not enough calories. Patients cannot live on intravenous fluids alone. Patients usually go from intravenous feedings to liquids, to a soft diet and then to a regular diet. Sometimes people are able to go straight from liquids to a regular diet.

## **Liquid diet**

Liquids include coffee, soft drinks, fruit juices, coconut water, clear soup or broth and sweetened tea. The person on liquids can also eat gelatine, sugar and hard candies. A liquid diet will give the patient enough fluids and some carbohydrates (from sugar and fruit juices). It will not supply proteins, fats, iron, or enough calories or vitamins. Usually a person should be on a liquid diet for only a short time after surgery or while recovering from acute stomach or intestinal diseases. A patient who has to be on a liquid diet for a long time should be given a nutritional supplement.

## **Soft diet**

A soft diet includes all foods that can be easily chewed and digested. For example, a soft diet might include various cooked, mashed root crops such as taro, kumara, cassava, and yams as well as rice, eggs, very tender lean meat or fish, pasta, tapioca, soft or pureed cooked greens or other vegetables, cooked fruits, bread, and soft desserts. This diet is used for patients who have difficulty chewing and swallowing.

## **Regular diet**

A regular diet is the food the patient normally eats, in particular local foods, which are high in protein, fibre, iron and vitamins.



### **Help the patient to eat**

**Make the patient comfortable.** To help a patient who is having trouble eating and who is in pain, it is useful to give pain medication 30 minutes before meal times. This will keep the pain from interfering with eating. For a person who has a fever, give paracetamol or other anti-fever medication before meals to keep the fever from interfering with appetite. Also, avoid doing painful or uncomfortable treatments before meals.

**Explain the importance of good nutrition.** Explain the importance of eating properly. Encourage the patient to try to eat at least small portions to help with recovery.

**Encourage the family to bring foods the patient likes from home.** Make sure that the family understands what foods the patient can and cannot eat. Use this opportunity to teach the family about a proper diet. This will help all members of the family as well as the patient. Explain to them the importance of using pasteurized milk, not raw milk, of washing foods such as lettuce which are eaten raw, and of thoroughly cooking meat, poultry and eggs. Tell them to store cooked foods carefully, protect foods from insects and rodents, and keep surfaces clean where food is prepared. Remind them to boil water unless they know it is safe and always wash their hands before preparing food.

**Position the patient for eating.** If the patient is allowed to sit up, help him or her to do so for meals. It is much easier to eat in this position.

**Make the surroundings pleasant.** Clean the bed table and make sure there is room for all dishes. Food should be served on a clean tray and should look attractive. Make sure there are eating utensils.

Keep the surrounding area clean and free of unpleasant smells. Remove bedpans, urinals and other such objects from the patient's sight. It is important that the patient's room and table offer a pleasant environment for eating.

Place the food conveniently for the patient. Give help as needed.

Encourage the patient's family to visit at meal times and to help him with eating. Remind them to wash their hands before helping the patient.

**If necessary, help the patient eat.** Some patients require special help with eating. For example, elderly patients are weak and easily tired. The effort of getting food to their mouth may be more than they can manage. You may need to feed such patients if their families are not there to feed them. Wash your hands first. Ask the patient if he or she would like help. If so, ask what he or she would like to eat first. Feed the patient in small bites. Allow time for chewing and swallowing before offering the next bite. Offer the patient something to drink after every three or four bites. Do not rush the patient or show that you are in a hurry. Use the time to get to know the patient. Take away the eating utensils when the patient has finished and see that they are washed.