

Checklist and Guide:

Recognizing Malnutrition in Older Adults

Malnutrition is often underrecognized and undertreated. If you suspect your parent is at risk, don't wait to intervene. Keep in mind – this checklist and guide isn't exhaustive and shouldn't be used in place of a professional evaluation.

Step 1: Observe eating and exercising patterns

If possible, spend a day or two observing your parent's daily routine, preferably in their own home. Pay attention to what they eat and how often. Pinpoint potentially concerning signs or symptoms using the checklist below.

My parent...

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Allows produce and other food items to spoil or expire | <input type="checkbox"/> Frequently coughs, gags or chokes while eating |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Appears swollen, especially in the hands, face and/or feet | <input type="checkbox"/> Has been diagnosed with cognitive impairment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Appears too thin or underweight | <input type="checkbox"/> Has been diagnosed with depression recently or in the past |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Complains about dental issues or appears to have trouble chewing | <input type="checkbox"/> Has been diagnosed with dysphasia |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Complains about loss of appetite | <input type="checkbox"/> Has been hospitalized frequently for trips/falls |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Complains about the taste, texture or smell of food | <input type="checkbox"/> Is mostly inactive and fatigued |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Eats very little or has trouble finishing meals | <input type="checkbox"/> Is suddenly wearing ill-fitting clothing and/or shoes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Experiences infrequent bowel movements | <input type="checkbox"/> Often overindulges in unhealthy food |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Experiences unplanned weight loss or gain | <input type="checkbox"/> Takes a long time to recover or heal after an illness or injury |

Notes

Step 2: Discuss nutrition with your parent

Using your observations, gently ask your parent about their eating habits or any health concerns. Ask open-ended questions like: “What do you like to eat?” “What’s the last meal you cooked?” “What makes cooking difficult for you?”

Notes

Helpful Tip: Avoid using a tone that could be interpreted as accusatory or clinical language like “exercise,” “malnourished” or “diet.” Instead, try using phrases like “healthy,” “nutritious” and “movement.”

Step 3: Ask a healthcare provider how to help

Use your findings to address the following topics with your parent’s healthcare provider or a referred dietitian.

Chronic illness/disease
inflammation

Food intake

Involuntary weight loss/gain

Loss of appetite

Mental health

Mobility

Prescription drug interactions

Reduced muscle mass

Required personal
care assistance

Step 4: Create a recipe for success at home

With the help of your parent's healthcare provider, brainstorm ways to introduce healthy habits your parent can accomplish on their own or with minimal assistance. Involve your parent in the discussion to see what they are open to trying.

Notes

Helpful Tip: *Instead of overhauling their routine, start with one or two changes and work your way up to more over time. This way, your parent won't feel overwhelmed and is more likely to adapt a routine that is easy to maintain.*