

Food demonstrations help older adults eat better

Keller, H.H., Hedley, M, Hadley, T, Wong, S & Vanderkooy, P. (2005) *Food Workshops, Nutrition Education, and Older Adults: A Process Evaluation*. *J Nutr for Elder*, 24(3):5-23.

Why do older adults need nutrition education?

Older adults are more likely to have eating problems, such as chewing difficulties and weight loss, than younger adults. Many older people are aware of the role nutrition plays in their health, and are therefore interested in learning about healthy aging and food. However, they are often hesitant to try new foods and recipes and may lack interest in cooking, especially for one. Food demonstrations or workshops that teach older people about healthy eating, such as the ones provided by Evergreen Action Nutrition (EAN), have been shown to be useful ways for older adults to get nutritional information. The popularity of the EAN programs has shown that older adults like the format and setting of food workshops, and enjoy participating in them.

What are food workshops?

EAN is a nutrition education program run through an older adult's centre in Guelph, Ontario. EAN got funding to run a three year program which was planned and monitored by older adults who visited the centre regularly. The program ran food demonstrations and workshops for three years, at a low cost. A nutrition educator was hired to design and run the workshops, which were based on the idea that older adults were interested in learning about nutrition and new foods if it was relevant to them. The workshops were places for older people to come together and socialize, gain knowledge on food preparation and nutritional content of foods prepared and be inspired to try new foods and dishes at home. Handouts were given to each workshop participant, including recipes and nutritional information of each recipe. Each workshop was two hours long, and limited to 15 people. An older adult planning group chose each workshop's theme, and in the third year of the workshops, two sets of three-month "series" were also offered. A theme was chosen for the three food demonstrations and educational activities built on information gained in the previous month's workshop. Feedback from participants was used to develop future demonstrations and evaluate the activities. A focus group was also used to hear participants' views on reasons for attending and the benefits and limitations of food demonstrations as a nutrition education vehicle.

What was found?

Over the program's three year run, 451 older adults took part in a single session workshop, and 76 people attended a series workshop. The majority of the program's participants were female. Overall, a high portion of older adults said they planned on making changes to the way they cooked and ate after going to a workshop. The main reason older adults took part in a workshop was their desire for better health. Older people wanted to learn more about new foods and enjoyed learning new cooking methods. The social aspect of the workshops, which let people talk and interact with others, was also found to be a positive aspect of the EAN program.

Importance of this Research:

Evaluations found that EAN workshops were helpful in getting nutritional information to older adults. Topics were relevant and presented in a relaxed, enjoyable manner. The workshops let people watch a recipe being made, ask questions about the cooking, and talk about the recipe's nutritional content. The program evaluations found that the customized recipe handouts were the most useful part of the workshops, as almost all participants said they used them later on at home.

Applying what was found:

Food demonstrations and workshops are a relevant vehicle for nutrition education with this age group. This educational activity allows older adults to try new foods and ingredients and share with their peers their experiences and challenges with cooking. Including older adults in the planning of the activity helps to ensure that topics and recipes are relevant.