

### **Nutrition in older adults predicts mortality**

Keller, H.H., Østbye, T. Nutritional Risk and Time to Death; Predictive Validity of SCREEN (Seniors in the Community Risk Evaluation for Eating and Nutrition). The Journal of Nutrition, Health and Aging. Vol. 7, No. 2, 274-279.

#### **Why do we need to screen for undernutrition?**

Older adults living in the community have a **high** incidence of undernutrition, which makes them susceptible to early death. Studies have shown that weight loss and other nutrition problems contributed to early mortality in older adults. Identifying seniors through screening who have these nutrition problems is essential so that preventive treatments can be put in place.

#### **What was done?**

Seniors were recruited from 23 agencies in southwestern Ontario that provided secondary assistance services, such as Meals on Wheels. To be eligible, the participant had to be dependant in at least one activity of daily living and have adequate cognition. A total of 367 volunteers were eligible and participated in the study. Each participant was interviewed and answered 108 baseline questions covering a range of topics including self-reported health problems, current perceived health status, and satisfaction with life as a whole (very satisfied to very unsatisfied.) Functional dependency and mobility were also assessed by a questionnaire. Nutritional risk was measured with SCREEN (Seniors in the Community Risk Evaluation for Eating and Nutrition) which is a 15 item questionnaire, where higher scores indicate less risk.

#### **What we found:**

Of the 367 older adult participants, 46.6% stated their health to be fair to poor, and reported on average 5.6 health problems. Low SCREEN scores were common which suggests a high level of nutrition risk in the study group. Participants scoring higher on SCREEN were more likely to have increased survival, while increased age was associated with earlier death. The SCREEN tool results show that those with higher nutrition risk face a quicker, more rapid decline to death than those who have less nutritional risk.

#### **Importance of the Research:**

Nutritional status among any age group is difficult to measure, yet the role it plays in determining mortality speaks to the need for simple, reliable tools to measure risk in the community. The baseline questions covered variables such as the size of the participant's social networks, current income and current perceived health status as compared to others their own age. Along with these questions, the SCREEN tool successfully predicted survival levels in "at-risk" older community living adults, and confirmed the link between undernutrition and death. This research shows how self-reported factors such as weight loss and cooking and shopping difficulties are important information to collect.

#### **Applying the findings:**

Nutrition risk is common in community living older adults. With adequate support, nutritional health can be improved, even in the oldest old. Nutritional risk as measured with a simple, self-report questionnaire was independently associated with mortality for older adults. There is a clear need for more programs designed to improve the nutritional status of this age group.