



Improving food intake as a means to enhancing health and preventing chronic disease in older adults.

Summary of: Keller, H. H. (2007). Promoting food intake in older adults living in the community: a review. *Applied Physiology Nutrition and Metabolism*, 32, 991-1000.

Why is this relevant?

Older adults living in the community are growing in proportion and number. It is predicted that almost 10 million seniors will be over the age of 65 in 20 short years! The fastest growing group of older adults is over the age of 80 years. The majority of older adults live in the community rather than in institutions. Most older adults have some level of chronic disease or disability; it is thus imperative that any factors that can modify the trajectory of disease progression be evaluated for their potential to improve quality of life and health. Food intake is known to be a modifiable risk factor.

What was reviewed:

This review presents the current state of nutrition research for community living older adults in Canada. Studies conducted over the past decade that examined food intake, determinants of this intake and interventions that have been shown to be beneficial are presented. Finally, next steps in terms of policy and research are discussed.

What was found:

Although seniors are a heterogenous group, in general food intake from provincial surveys has found that older adults do not consume enough nutrients or food groups to meet their basic requirements. Food choices, as with the rest of population, tend to be high in energy and lower in nutrients, resulting in overweight but undernourished adults. Nutrition risk which precedes undernutrition is also prevalent. Risk factors include poor appetite, swallowing and chewing problems, food security as well as difficulties with food-related activities of daily living. There are many things that lead to nutrition risk and poor food intake including: health status, transportation, motivation to eat well, social relationships, proximity to grocery stores, living alone, etc. Nutrition risk screening in the form of simple questionnaires may be useful for raising awareness, helping older adults to access community services, and lead to earlier identification of nutrition problems and educational interventions. A variety of valid and reliable screening tools are available. Several community-level interventions are described that have been evaluated and found to improve food intake and nutrition knowledge of older adults. These include meal programs, education activities and cooking groups. Policy lags behind this knowledge, as few jurisdictions in Canada have legislation promoting health of older adults, and none have mandated screening programs.

Importance of research:

A significant amount of research has been conducted in Canada in the past decade. In addition to research conducted around the world, this knowledge points toward the need for increased policy to promote healthy aging through nutrition in older adults. Although more research is needed, results to date demonstrate the utility of targeting older adults for prevention efforts.

Applying what was found:

This review paper can be used as a starting point for discussion among policy makers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, and older adults. Policy is needed to move forward an agenda for prevention that will improve the health and well-being of older adults.