

MALNUTRITION

RISK OF MALNUTRITION

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This patient letter is designed to support the consultation by the GP. The GP gives the letter to patients with the disease or condition in question. This information is not designed to replace a consultation by the GP. When reading the information below, consider that your health situation may differ from what is described.

What is malnutrition?

Healthy nutrition provides the energy and nutrients your body needs to function properly. Healthy nutrition is important to become and remain fit. Sometimes eating regular, healthy meals is not possible. This isn't a major problem if it lasts a week, but can become one if it goes on for longer. If you do not get enough energy and nutrients, your body starts using emergency supplies stored in fat and muscle tissue. Your fat and muscle tissue is broken down. You will become thinner and weaker and lose weight. You will be tired faster and be less interested in eating and moving properly. It will become increasingly difficult to become fit again. If you continue to lose weight without intending to, for example three kilograms in a month, we call it malnutrition.

You can still have malnutrition if you are not (yet) thin, if insufficient nutrition leads to muscle and fat breakdown.

What are the symptoms?

You have probably been eating less regularly and less healthily for some time. Your appetite has decreased and you have difficulties finishing your food. You may find it difficult to do the shopping or cook a tasty meal. You lose a few kilos in a few weeks. You feel tired and listless. You may also experience dizziness.

What is the cause?

If you eat nothing or very little for a week, you lose weight. Malnutrition develops if you eat little or unhealthily for a longer period of time. Your appetite may decrease due to disease, pain or worries, because of certain medication or excessive use of alcohol. While you are sick or recovering, your body uses more energy and nutrients. The odds of you losing weight without intending to are greater then. Diarrhoea and vomiting can lead to your body not absorbing food properly, causing faster weight loss.

Unintended weight loss can have many causes:

- Long-term (chronic) diseases such as COPD or heart failure
- Malignant diseases (cancer)
- Long-lasting pain
- Recovery period following a heavy operation or disease
- Long-term use of medication (for example antidepressants, antipsychotics or anti-diabetic medication)
- Drug use
- Smoking or excessive alcohol consumption
- Sombre mood (depression), loneliness, sadness, severe tension or stress
- Memory loss (dementia)
- Loss of taste or smell
- Problems chewing or swallowing
- Poor mobility, making it impossible to buy or prepare food.

Recommendations

It usually isn't easy to start eating enough and healthily again on your own. It can help to run through the following recommendations together with someone:

1. Check whether you are eating enough and healthily

For a few days, write down everything you eat and drink, including the time of day and the approximate amount. This includes meals as well as snacks and drinks. Together, we will discuss how you might be able to change your eating habits in order to get enough nutrients and energy.

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2. Eat regularly

Eat at least three meals per day, preferably at fixed times. If this is difficult for you, you can eat smaller meals five to six times per day. If someone cares for you on a daily basis, you can make an eating plan with them: eat something three, four or even six times a day at fixed times.

3. Make it tasty and cosy

If you have no appetite, it can be difficult to eat your daily meals. Think of ways to make eating easier and more attractive. Make sure to vary your meals, choosing healthy foods you enjoy eating. Make an appointment to cook together with someone. Try out new recipes and eat together. A fun atmosphere and good food will help. Don't force it, but check whether you can take a small step each day. You will feel fitter.

4. Make sure you have healthy food in the house

If you cannot do your own shopping, ask a good neighbour, friend or family member to help you. Others often enjoy being able to help, for example by shopping with you or doing the shopping. Make sure you have a supply of healthy foods in the house for days you cannot manage to go shopping.

5. Select foods that are easy to prepare

You can buy healthy food that is partially or fully prepared in almost every supermarket. Pre-cut vegetables and pre-cooked potatoes are perfectly fine.

If you regularly consume ready-to-eat meals, eat some raw vegetables or a piece of fruit or fruit compotes with your meal. Or regularly eat a meal salad.

If you have little energy or difficulty moving, modified kitchen equipment can be useful. For example a specialized tin and jar opener, an easy to use drainage spout. You can request additional information about these aids via Home Care.

6. If necessary, have a warm meal delivered to your home

You can also use meal services like 'Tafeltje-dek-je'. There is usually a menu to choose from. You can obtain addresses for Tafeltje-dek-je or other meal services in your area via the practice, home care or the 'neighbourhood paper'. If possible, try cooking for yourself from time to time.

7. Make sure you move regularly

Take a walk every day, or if you cannot go outside, do a few exercises by the open window. You will feel fitter and have a better appetite. Check to see if you can manage half an hour of extra physical activity every day. Try other forms of physical activity, such as cycling, swimming or gardening.

8. Do not smoking

Smoking decreases diet. Do not smoke and eat in a smoke-free environment. You will taste and enjoy your food more.

What to do next?

We will regularly discuss how things are going. Weigh yourself once a week (on the same scale). This allows you to monitor weight changes. If you require more support, you can contact the practice. In some cases, we may need to ask the dietician to help you choose your foods. You will be given tips on making food tastier and easier to make.

Do you have any more questions?

If you still have questions after reading this letter, please ask them during a next visit.