
Eating and drinking in hospital

Summary

- Eating well and drinking plenty of water is important to your health and recovery.
 - Most hospitals have a menu system. To choose your daily meals, fill out your menu on time and ask staff if you need any help.
 - If you have special dietary requirements communicate these to hospital staff looking after you.
 - Tell staff if you have special diet needs or eating problems, such as swallowing difficulties.
 - If you are worried about your diet, ask to see a dietitian, as they can help you reach and keep a healthy weight.
 - Before having food brought in from outside the hospital, check with the nurse looking after you, because there are food safety rules in hospitals.
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In hospital, food is an important part of the treatment and care of patients. Eating and drinking regularly in hospital are as important to your health and wellbeing as taking your medication. Not eating and drinking enough is a common problem for older people in hospital and it can slow down your recovery.

Healthy eating and drinking in hospital

Eating healthy food and drinking enough water are important in maintaining healthy skin and play a key role in wound healing. Not eating and drinking enough can quickly cause weight and muscle loss, particularly for older people. This will mean losing strength, which can make you less mobile and more likely to fall.

Losing weight and muscle can also increase the chance of skin damage and mean any damage takes longer to heal. Overall, it can mean a longer stay in hospital and can even mean you don't fully recover.

Some of the reasons that older people may not be eating enough for good nutrition include:

- reduced appetite
- reduced sense of smell or taste
- dental health issues
- gastrointestinal problems
- anxiety
- feeling lonely and isolated.

The food and drink you get in hospital may be different to what you eat at home. Even if you don't feel like eating or don't like the food very much, it's a good idea to try to eat it anyway. You can also ask staff if your family or friends can bring you food that you would prefer to eat. Most hospitals require that you check with them before bringing in your own food.

Tips for healthy eating in hospital

When you arrive at hospital, tell staff if you:

- have any problems eating and drinking
 - have any problems with your teeth, mouth or swallowing
 - are on a restricted diet
 - feel you 'cannot eat'
 - have recently lost your appetite or lost weight without trying.
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If you are worried about your diet, ask to see a dietitian. They can talk to you about your concerns and help you with a plan to reach and keep a healthy weight.

You can also ask to be weighed when you first come to hospital and regularly during your hospital stay.

Daily meals in hospital

Most hospitals have a menu system. To choose your daily meals, fill out the menu on time (usually the day before) or you will receive a standard meal that may not be to your liking.

To make it easier to fill in the menu:

- Bring a pen or pencil to hospital to complete your menu, and keep it in a safe place that is easy to reach.
- Some hospitals have moved to an electronic or digital system where your meal order is recorded on an electronic device such as a tablet.
- Ask for help to complete the menu if you need it.

Talk to staff about what foods you eat or don't eat, and about your eating habits. Let staff know if there are foods you won't eat, for example, because of your religion or culture. The kitchen should be able to cater for special needs.

Additional food and supplements in hospital

Before having food brought in from outside the hospital, check with the nurse looking after you, because there are food safety rules in hospitals.

Tell the hospital staff if you usually take any extra healthy drinks or supplements,

It's also important to let the hospital staff know if you have a swallowing problem and need to have your food pureed or minced or your drinks thickened.

Eating and drinking for health while in hospital

The food brought to you in hospital has been designed to meet your daily nutrition requirements.

Make sure you:

- eat regular main meals and snacks, and drink plenty of water (unless your doctor has told you not to)
- wear dentures and glasses if you normally do
- ask a staff member if you need help with eating, drinking or to open food packaging
- sit out of bed to eat meals or eat in the patients' dining room if there is one, if possible
- keep your over-bed table as clear as possible, so that staff have a place to put your meal
- ask the person delivering your meal to move it closer to you, if the over-bed table is too far away
- ask staff if your family or friends can bring you meals or snacks from home.

Sometimes, tests and treatments take place during mealtimes, or you may need to not eat or drink anything before a test or treatment (hospital staff will tell you if this is the case). If you miss a meal because of a test or treatment, speak to staff about getting food and drink as soon as possible.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Nursing staff
- Hospital allied health staff
- Patient liaison officer

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

National Ageing Research Institute (NARI)

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