



DIETETICS



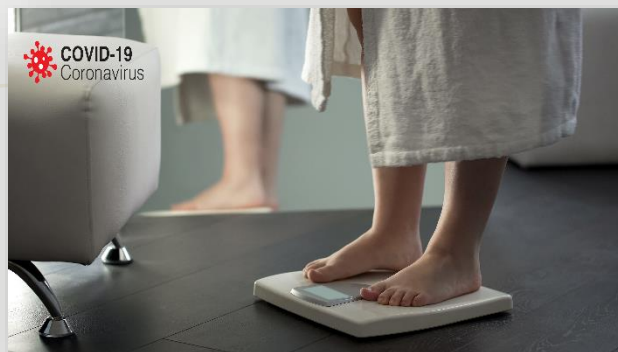
Weighing in on the COVID-19 pandemic: How to reduce Weight Loss during this time

By Ella Monaghan, OSCAR Care Group Lead Dietitian

The increase of confirmed COVID-19 cases throughout Australia, particularly within residential Aged Care is deeply saddening as the virus continues to impact the most vulnerable members of our community.

As the rates of confirmed cases continue to rise, Dietitians continue to see the impact that the pandemic is having on unintentional weight loss of residents.

This article will provide information as to reasons why unintentional weight loss may be occurring during the pandemic, and importantly provide some strategies to target weight loss.



Why is Weight Loss a concern?

Unintentional weight loss is a significant concern within the elderly demographic as this is strongly associated with malnutrition.

Malnutrition is highly prevalent within the residential aged care sector with up to 50% of residents being diagnosed with malnutrition.

Malnutrition has significant clinical consequences for residents such as:

- Increased mortality
- Increased prevalence of falls, fractures
- Increased risk of infection
- Reduced independence
- Delayed wound healing

Why is Weight Loss occurring during the pandemic?

There are multiple factors which can impact on weight loss during this global health crisis. These may include:

- **Reduced mood** associated with reduced interaction/visits from loved ones which can lower appetite resulting in reduced oral intake.
- **Anxiousness or distress** relating to media coverage regarding the pandemic can significantly reduce residents' interest in eating.
- **Visitor restrictions** can impact on eating as loved ones often are involved in assisting residents at mealtimes and residents are likely to consume large quantities when fed by a loved one. However, due to visitor restrictions these visits during mealtimes are unable to occur and therefore the change in feeding routine can be unsettling for the resident, resulting in reduced intake.
- **Family are unable to bring in culturally acceptable food** for residents, therefore impacting on their eating patterns and can reduce oral intake if the meals provided on the menu are not culturally appropriate.
- **Being unable to eat in the dining room and socialise with fellow residents** can significantly reduce food consumption, as eating with others can increase intake and promote a positive mealtime experience.



When to refer to a Dietitian?

Dietitians are highly qualified in medical nutrition therapy and conduct comprehensive nutritional assessments taking into account various factors impacting on oral intake.

Dietitians provide practical strategies to ensure residents are meeting their nutritional needs, whilst focusing on quality of life.

The Australian Government has deemed that **Allied Health visits such as Dietetics are an essential service** & therefore on-site visits are permitted.

All **OSCAR** Care Group Allied Health staff adhere to strict infection control protocol and ensure appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks are worn during visits to ensure residents are protected.

In the event that a facility does not wish for an on-site visit to occur, OSCAR Care Group Dietitians are available to conduct referrals via Telehealth to ensure that all referrals are completed in a timely manner.





It is recommended that a referral for a Dietetic Assessment is made for ANY of the following reasons:

- Weight loss of >2kg in 1 month OR >3kg in 3 months
- Body Mass Index (BMI) <23kg/m²
- Malnutrition screening results indicate at risk of malnutrition or malnourished
- Poor oral intake
- Stage >2 pressure injury or slow to heal wounds
- For residents who require enteral feeding
- Ongoing symptoms of nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea
- Infections
- Underlying renal or liver failure

How to reduce unintentional weight loss

Food fortification involves increasing the energy (kJ) and protein content of food without increasing the volume – making every mouthful matter!

A variety of foods can be fortified using a range of simple ingredients such as butter, cream, oil, skim milk powder and cheese. Food fortification is a simple & cost-effective measure to improve the nutritional content of food, whilst increasing meal satisfaction and quality of life.

Food Fortification in action

Cereal/porridge: Prepare using high protein milk (see our *Nourishing Drink Recipes*) or nutritional supplement powder such as Sustagen Neutral.

Tea/coffee: Prepare all tea and coffee with high protein milk throughout the day, the high protein milk can be prepared in bulk and stored in the fridge for easy access at mid meals.

Mash potato: Fortify mash potato by adding extra butter, oil, skim milk powder and make with high protein milk.

Soup: Prepare all creamy based soups with extra cream, full fat milk and skim milk powder. You can also add in a nutritional supplement powder such as Sustagen Neutral for additional kJ and protein.

Dessert and mid meal: Fruit should always be served with custard or yoghurt to ensure sufficient protein and energy as a mid-meal or dessert choice.

It is recommended to provide nourishing desserts such as scones, cakes, slices, mousse, pudding or tarts which contains greater energy and protein.

Sandwiches: Ensure all sandwiches contain a protein source such as egg, ham, roast meats, cheese or peanut butter.

Supper: It is recommended that a high energy high protein snack is provided at supper time – this may be cheese and biscuits, custard, yoghurt, a warm milo prepared with high protein milk or a nutritional supplement.

Comfort & Reassurance

It is important that we take time to reassure residents and provide emotional support during these difficult times to reduce feelings of anxiousness and distress. Often, we can find comfort in food during difficult circumstances – let's use this opportunity to provide residents with their favourite foods as we continue to strive for a positive dining experience which aims to reduce the incidence of malnutrition.



OSCAR Care Group Dietitians are available to conduct on-site or Telehealth consultations to assist your facility in reducing the incidence of unintentional weight loss and to provide menu support and guidance.



Do you need further Nutrition information?

This article was written by **OSCAR** Care Group's Lead Dietitian, Ella Monaghan. Please call or email via our contact details below.

Reference

Dietitians Australia. Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. March 2019.

Available from; https://dietitiansaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/DAA_Royal-Commission-Aged-Care_Mar-2019_Final.pdf

