Start with the problem; the REAL problem.

... not always what you think it is!
More elderly suffer from malnutrition

WALTERS "You are what you eat." But for many elderly people, what they eat may not be what they need. Malnutrition is a serious health issue among the elderly, and it can lead to a variety of health problems and complications.

Elderly people are more likely to suffer from malnutrition due to a number of factors, including decreased appetite, decreased sense of taste and smell, and decreased ability to chew and swallow. These factors can make it difficult for elderly people to meet their nutritional needs.

Elderly people are also more likely to suffer from chronic diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer, which can further exacerbate their nutritional problems. Additionally, elderly people are more likely to suffer from social isolation, which can further contribute to their nutritional problems.

There are several ways to help elderly people overcome their nutritional problems. One way is to provide them with nutritious meals and snacks. This can be done through meal delivery services, food banks, and community meal programs.

Another way to help elderly people overcome their nutritional problems is to provide them with access to healthy foods. This can be done through food assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and community garden programs.

Finally, it is important to encourage elderly people to eat a balanced diet. This can be done by providing them with dietary guidelines and teaching them about the importance of eating a variety of foods.

In conclusion, malnutrition is a serious health issue among the elderly, and it can lead to a variety of health problems and complications. By providing elderly people with nutritious meals and snacks, access to healthy foods, and dietary guidelines, we can help them overcome their nutritional problems and improve their overall health.
Lack of proper diet can put senior citizens at high risk of malnutrition

WHETHER out of a diminished enjoyment of food or the fact that they live alone, one in three elderly people is not taking in enough calcium, carbohydrates and fibre.

The upshot of their poor food choices? They are at high risk of malnutrition, a condition caused by a diet of too much or too few nutrients such as zinc or iron.

The findings were published recently in two separate studies by Tan Tock Seng Hospital and health-care company Abbott Nutrition.

Together, the studies surveyed 720 elderly people in Singapore aged 50 and older.

The Abbott study also found that the elderly living in one- and two-room flats have a higher risk of malnutrition.

Experts The Straits Times spoke to said the poor attention many elderly people paid to their diet could lead to more frequent falls, slower recovery from injuries and a host of diet-related complications such as fragile bones.

At a nutrition seminar in Singapore yesterday, Professor Jean-Pierre Michel, the head of the geriatric ward at the Geneva Medical School and University Hospitals, said the findings were “serious”.

He said the lack of a proper diet was linked to a condition called sarcopenia, which causes people to lose muscle mass and strength.

This could lead to the elderly becoming weaker and more prone to falls, he added, noting that about 20 per cent of people who suffer hip fractures die within a year of the injury.

“At half of them never regain their former mobility,” he said.

Experts The Straits Times spoke to said reasons for the elderly’s poor diet ranged from a lack of interest in food to their living environment.

Dietitian Teo Soo Lay at the Singapore General Hospital said elderly people who live alone have no motivation to cook for themselves. “Most of the time, they will just eat biscuits or plain bread for their main meals, which is very poor nutrition,” she added.

Others said natural consequences of ageing, such as problems with chewing and swallowing, also put the elderly off their food.

Mr Kavin Snow, director of Touch Home Care, which delivers meals to the elderly, said it makes sure the food comes in small pieces to aid digestion.

“We don’t serve hard and deep-fried food either,” he added.

Elderly people The Straits Times spoke to said they were not fussy about food because their sense of taste had declined.

Retiree Dng Suan Kiat, 84, who lives alone in a Chintatown flat, said he drinks two cups of black coffee – for the sharp taste – and eats all three meals a day at a hawkers centre.

“Sometimes, somebody will buy me a steamed bun and I’ll eat that,” he said.

“At my age, it all tastes about the same.”

Others added more salt or spices such as chilli to give the food an extra “kick”.

“Otherwise, what’s the point of eating if you can’t taste anything?” said housewife Jenny Chua, 55, who cooks for her family about twice a week.

Nutritionists said there was no need to totally restrict the intake of salt and sugar but moderation was the key.

They added that more education about the nutritional value of food was needed.

They said the elderly tend to eat more white rice, believing it is good for them, even though it actually offers little nutritional value.

Family members also need to play a role, noted SGH’s Ms Teo.

She said some people may routinely serve the elderly the same dishes out of fear that other types of food could be unhealthy.

“That makes food unappealing to the elderly in general. It’s important to keep eating interesting to them,” she said.

Retiree Irene Teo, 67, who makes sure her family eats together at least once a week, has a simple tip for the younger generation.

“Eat with your parents and pay attention to them. That always makes us want to eat healthily too.”

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Elderly men missing out on proper meals

Men are more likely than women to be malnourished and less likely to care about healthy food choices. JONATHAN LIAUTRAKUL reports

A 57-year-old blue-collar worker tends to skip dinner as he feels it would “help him lose weight”. An 80-year-old retiree is not bothered about healthy eating because it is “so convenient eating out”.

These two men, who live with their families, typify the kind of neglect common in the nutrition of older people today.

An informal Mind Your Body poll of 10 seniors on their diets found that four might be at risk of malnutrition. They are usually retired and have families who are out at work, leaving them to eat alone.

Ms Chong Hui Hsieh, a senior diettian at Changi General Hospital, noted that men are more likely than women to not bother about their meals. She said: “Males are less likely to have a more balanced diet than females, and they don’t seem to care about healthy choices.”

Ms Lim Yen Peng, a senior diettian at the department of nutrition and diettics at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), said that while most of the respondents have at least three meals daily, it is important to include at least two servings of fruit and more vegetables.

The lack of attention by the elderly to their diet was highlighted recently in a poll done by health-care company Abbott Nutrition last year.

Only 1 per cent of 421 respondents aged 50 years and above had a diet that met the recommended servings of food by the Health Promotion Board.

Dietitians said the root of the problem is ignorance about the kind of nutrients that the elderly need and the physical changes wrought by ageing that make proper meals a challenge.

In an ageing population, untreated malnutrition could pose a growing risk.

It causes fatigue and poor healing of wounds. It increases the risk of infection and injury due to falls, leading to hospitalisation and death.

Mr For Wei Chek, the diettics manager at Mount Alvernia Hospital, said the elderly tend to have a diet high in refined carbohydrates, such as white rice, which offers little nutritional value.

Often their diets lack vitamins and dietary fibre from fruit, vegetables and wholegrains, protein from fish and meat, minerals like iron from legumes and calcium from dairy products.

An elderly person may not eat enough because changes in hormone levels and gastrointestinal functions, or medication, could take a toll on his appetite. The lack of hunger could be exacerbated by chewing problems or poor dental health.

Ms Chong said: “The elderly have a reduced sense of taste and smell. This is often results in a reduced interest in food.”

This lack of interest in food is often wrongly attributed to age.

Ms Chong said: “Many elderly folk and even their family members think it is all right to eat less as one ages.”

Problems with chewing and swallowing can also affect interest in food, said Dr Tan Thai Lian, a senior consultant at the department of geriatric medicine at TTSH.

Then there are the socio-psychological factors. Elderly people who live alone and feel isolated or are mostly confined at home have little motivation to eat.

Ms Lim said: “They may not be willing to put in so much effort to cook for themselves compared to cooking for their family, and often end up eating very simple and repetitive meals lacking in variety.”

Another problem is that the elderly do not drink enough water because of reduced sensitivity to thirst, said Mr For.

Dr Tan recommends small frequent meals, which are easy to chew and swallow, throughout the day.

Dr Lim Si Ching, a consultant at the department of geriatric medicine at Singapore General Hospital, said family members can pick vegetables and fruits like pumpkins, legumes, papaya and watermelon, which are softer and easier to chew.

“There is no need to totally restrict the intake of salt and sugar as food without flavour will worsen their appetite,” she said.

Finally, families must learn to bear with the eating difficulties faced by the elderly and strengthen familial bonding.

Dr Lim said: “Social interaction is important in building up the appetites of the elderly. Encourage them to eat more healthily by letting them be present at the same dinner table.”

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Frailty in Modern Singapore

The Vicious Spiral of Frailty

Withdraw and avoid seeking help to maintain dignity

Physical and Mental Decline

Social Isolation

Lose motivation to be active and eat well
START WITH WHAT’S STRONG, NOT WHAT’S WRONG

Focusing on frailty emphasises the problem, not the hope for a solution. Positive framing excites people into action.

DIGNITY, NOT CHARITY

People who come are not ‘recipients of charity’. Participants wash their own bowls and clean up after themselves instead of being served.

INDIVIDUALLY GOOD, EVEN BETTER TOGETHER

People come back to be part of the synergy in the community. It is a safety net that removes the stigma of seeking help.
As simple as my mother’s soup

We found the answer lies in our Asian culture of eating together and memories of traditional family reunions where a shared pot of nutritious home-cooked soup is always indispensable. Realising the nourishment that soups provide to one’s body and soul, we thus imagined a community in which the elderly and their friends unite around a pot of hot soup to rally and encourage each other to grow stronger and live well, regardless of physical and mental ability.
**Bonding over exercise**

We observed that elders enjoy group exercises such as Taichi and Zumba. So, armed with home-cooked pots of soup as the signature symbol and attraction of the programme, we also got the elderly moving with group exercises in ‘third places’ from schools, religious organisations and community centres, to eldercare facilities like Senior Activity Centres and Nursing Homes that open their doors to the public.
Age-old recipes infused with new science

Traditional Chinese soup is boiled for hours. The protein from ingredients like meat enriches the bone broth, creating a nutritious muscle-strengthening supplement. For an added boost, we acidified the soup to extract the bone-building calcium as well. We maximised these effects by pairing the soups with exercise. This stimulates a prolonged increase in muscle synthesis for as long as 24 hours.
Programme Overview

Partner sites are trained with a starter kit

Participants get a step tracker, a good workout and a hearty soup

Every week, they join their new friends for exercise and soup
Share a Pot / Brewing Compassion, Simply

This is a compassionate and harmonious community with a sympathetic understanding of Asian culture. This soup is good for body and soul as it combines healthy eating with sharing and nurturing a sense of belonging for the elderly. A loving, caring project that allows people to have a positive impact in each other’s life is never so hard!

Jury Statement
FROM WHEELCHAIR TO WALKING

“Before I joined these exercises, I was in a wheelchair for nearly one and a half years. After one year, I told my daughter, ‘I think I can walk, can you give me something to hold...’ I left the wheelchair and it is now seven or eight months without the wheelchair.”

Francis, 91 years old
LIVES TRANSFORMED

Mdm Lim has high blood sugar and stiff knees, while Mr Lui, her son, has intellectual disability and experiences fainting and vomiting spells. Joining Share a Pot, she gained new confidence as a caregiver. "I would just buy noodle soup. Now, I cook with more protein and flavour so my son can have it with his medication. If we weren’t here right now, we would be sleeping at home. My son loves to come here. Even on rainy days he insists, ‘No, no, no, we have to go!’"

Mdm Lim & Son, 66 years old & 40 years old

1700 registered | 900 active
NEW PURPOSE IN LIFE

Patricia retired a few years ago. Unsure how to spend her free time, she heard from a friend that Share a Pot was being set up. “I love cooking! I was thinking of volunteering for a good cause. It’s been very rewarding to see everyone enjoy and feel happy about my soup.” She has since shared 12 of her recipes with other sites.

Patricia Goh, 60 years old
OUR LOCAL HEROES
Uncle Lee Moon Thong, gives free fish bones

OUR LOCAL HEROES
Uncle Chen, sells vegetables at discount

1700 registered | 900 active | 200 volunteers
1700 registered | 900 active | 200 volunteers | 20 active sites
"Initially, all of us came for Share a Pot to exercise and savour the soup. As we gained trust and fostered friendship, we started to meet up outside. I felt we have sought a balance enriching each other’s life, and I sense all of us treasured this camaraderie."

Mr Fok, 56 years old
“If you can’t feed a hundred people, then just feed one.”

- Mother Teresa -
Building Brain, Brawn, Bones, & Bonds, through broth!

https://www.shareapot.sg

If you wish to know more about starting or supporting share a pot®, you may contact:

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