Mealtimes Matter in Long-term Care

Written by Kristian Partington

After an extensive two-year study involving more than 600 residents from 32 long-term care (LTC) homes in four Canadian provinces, RIA’s Heather Keller (Schlegel Research Chair in Nutrition & Aging) and her research team are ready to start sharing results. The study, called Making the Most of Mealtimes (M3), focused on exploring what residents eat in LTC and understanding what factors contribute to better nutritional intake and a better mealtime experience.

Among those involved in the study, researchers learned that residents weren’t always eating enough or drinking enough. However, when considering the number of reasons why this might be, an interesting finding emerged. Residents who received person-centred support at mealtimes (e.g., their preferences, needs and values were respected) tended to eat more food at mealtimes. This research shows it’s not just the food on the plate that matters – the mealtime experience plays a crucial role.

With these results in hand, the team has been busy sharing information and developing tools to help care providers enhance the mealtime experience for the people they serve.

“We know that at every stage of life, mealtimes are incredibly important,” says RIA’s Hilary Dunn, who supported Heather and

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team on this project. “This research not only supports that, but it provides us with some insight into what we can do to help improve the mealtime experience for those living in long-term care. We have a much better understanding of what will have the greatest impact on residents’ dining experience.”

The team has developed a short video called “Mealtimes Matter” to share the research results and encourage those in the long-term care sector to start making change in their dining rooms to make the most of every meal. Two new resources have been developed to help get teams started, including the CHOICE+ Mealtime Practices Checklist, which encourages person-centred practices at mealtimes; and the CHOICE+ Dining Room Checklist, which will help make dining rooms more welcoming and comfortable. A Mealtime Satisfaction Questionnaire is also available to help understand residents’ preferences and perspectives at mealtimes.

In addition to enhancing the mealtime experience, the team is exploring ways to increase the nutrient density of foods served in LTC by adding or substituting ingredients in popular foods. So far the team has created a number of recipes, for example, sweet potato ice cream and apple banana lentil muffins, and have assessed their nutritional content. Next, they will be conducting taste tests to see if the products are well-liked. The sweet potato ice cream is already getting good reviews!

By enhancing both the food on the plate and the dining experience, we can make the most of mealtimes in long-term care and residents’ health and well-being will benefit. To learn more about this project, please contact Hilary Dunn at hilary.dunn@uwaterloo.ca or 519-904-0660 ext 4104.