

Making the Most of Mealtime in Long–Term Care during COVID–19

Mealtime in long-term care (LTC) is about much more than food, it provides social interaction, can affect mental well-being and promotes health beyond the food on the plate. COVID-19 has presented many challenges around mealtimes in LTC. Heather Keller, Schlegel Research Chair in Nutrition and Aging at the Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging, has several tips to create a positive mealtime experience even with social distancing restrictions.

For more information on Professor Keller’s research, visit our website: www.the-ria.ca.

Social Interaction

Social interaction at meals can stimulate appetite in older adults in LTC. Some considerations to stimulate interest in food, even when dining is in resident rooms:

- Have family or friends call the resident before a meal—talk about their day and what they are having for their next meal.
- Create fun events for residents that are food focused. For example, recreation team members can have themed snack options e.g. ice cream delivery, make your own sundae (resident sits at their door and instructs the team); bingo or other competitive events can have a food prize.
- Team members spend a few minutes discussing the meal choices with residents to stimulate interest in upcoming meals.

Increasing Appetite

Being alone in resident rooms can affect mood as well as result in less physical movement; both can reduce appetite. Some considerations to stimulate appetite:

- When staff are setting up the meal, speak with the resident about how good the food smells, compliment how it looks, and that they anticipate it tastes good too.
- Arrange daily opportunities for residents to leave their room, be outside in the nice weather etc.
- Every interaction with staff should include a verbal interaction that can support the resident’s mood. Smile, ask how they are doing, share something you know they like to hear about.
- Consider providing high energy and protein foods as the ‘standard’ for most residents when they are eating in their room.

Importance of Fluids

Inadequate fluid intake is a common concern when residents are eating alone in their rooms. Some considerations for increasing fluid intake:

- Nursing team members provide medications one at a time, encouraging a sip of fluid with each pill.
- Offer the residents their preferred fluid several times a day.

Eating

Residents may lose capacity for self-feeding when isolated. Some considerations to support eating:

- Have a meal helper follow the food delivery cart to support opening packages, encouraging the resident and ensuring they have everything they need.
- Provide normal dishware rather than disposable; sanitation will occur with normal dishwashing machines.

November 2020