

A simple nutrition care program improves health and quality of life among aging adults at risk of malnutrition

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Baby boomers are aging and the U.S. population is too. The proportion of U.S. adults 65-and-older grew more than a third since 2010 and now

includes 54.1 million adults. To help the baby boomers maintain their quality of life and physical functionality, it's critical to encourage healthy aging, yet up to 1 in 3 adults are at risk of malnutrition which can have significant health and cost implications.

New research published in *Value in Health Regional Issues* demonstrates that a simple nutrition care program can drive [health benefits](#) like physical functionality, cognitive function, psychological well-being and quality of life.

The study, conducted in partnership with Abbott, and Colombia's Javeriana University and San Ignacio Hospital, was a first-of-its-kind study in Latin America, involving more than 600 malnourished or at-risk [older adults](#)—many of whom had a recent hospitalization or were managing a chronic disease.

The researchers studied the impact of a three-step nutrition care program that: 1) Screened and identified individuals at risk of malnutrition; 2) Provided nutrition education and oral nutritional supplements; and 3) Followed up to provide support and reinforce compliance.

After following the personalized nutrition care program, more than half of study participants had improvements in nutritional status, and improvement or maintenance of leg muscle mass, [body weight](#) and body mass index (BMI), which helped drive other benefits. At least 1 in 3 participants had compromised baseline status in psychological well-being, quality of life, cognitive function and/or physical functionality, and when these individuals followed the program, they saw improvements in all four areas:

- 84% of participants had improved psychological well-being
- 76% of participants had improved quality of life by improving their mobility and self-care (bathing, grooming, etc.)

- 75% of participants had improved cognitive function
- 48% of participants had improved physical functionality

Improved health benefits were associated with a 40% reduction in hospitalizations, [emergency department](#) and outpatient visits over 90 days, which resulted in reduced healthcare costs.

"Malnutrition is an often-hidden condition that can have [harmful effects](#) on overall health and interfere with healthy aging," said Suela Sulo, Ph.D., MS, a [health economics](#) and outcomes researcher at Abbott and a study author. "The nutrition care program implemented in this study is simple and cost effective and can be implemented both in-person or virtually, yet it can have a profound impact."

Tackling malnutrition to promote U.S. aging adults

Older adults are managing a lot—from chronic health conditions to the physical changes that come with age. Often their nutritional status can be overlooked, which can have a large impact on their health and strength with age.

"For older adults—especially those managing a chronic disease—who want to stay independent, aging well means taking care of both their physical and psychological well-being," said Tiffany DeWitt, RD, MBA, registered dietitian and nutrition science lead for Abbott's nutrition business in Latin America. "Good nutritional status is an important determinant of health in aging. Malnutrition is associated with lower physical function, poorer [quality of life](#) and shorter survival."

Fortunately, simple steps taken by [healthcare professionals](#), caregivers and older adults can help reduce malnutrition and help promote healthy aging:

- **Be aware of malnutrition symptoms:** Malnutrition is common in the U.S. but it's not always top of mind—symptoms like decreased energy, unintentional weight loss, or a recent surgery or hospitalization can increase an adult's malnutrition risk.
- **Continuously re-evaluate your health:** Adults' nutritional status can fluctuate based on different circumstances—a recent illness or hospitalization can increase risk for malnutrition. Therefore, adults should continuously look for signs and symptoms and seek help if they think they're at risk.
- **Consult an expert:** For adults who may be at risk, it is recommended they seek a consultation with a registered dietitian nutritionist who can help assess their [nutritional status](#) and provide a personalized nutrition care program.
- **Consider a nutritional supplement:** Adults' nutritional needs change as they age, and nutritional needs are unique for those managing a chronic condition, recently hospitalized or undergoing surgery. An oral nutritional supplement, like Ensure or Glucerna, can help adults get important nutrients they need.

More information: Suela Sulo et al, Nutrition-Focused Care for Community-Living Adults: Healthcare Utilization and Economic Benefits, *Value in Health Regional Issues* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.vhri.2022.08.005](#)

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