



THE IMPORTANCE OF  
EATING WELL FOR  
CARERS



# WHY IS EATING WELL IMPORTANT?

Looking after a friend or relative can be hugely rewarding, but at times it can also be tiring and stressful.

Carers often put their own needs last. Amongst the day-to-day challenges of looking after someone else it can be easy to forget about your own health needs.

As a carer, eating a balanced diet is essential to provide your body with all the nutrients it needs. A balanced diet will keep your body strong and give you enough energy to provide the best care for the person you are caring for and yourself.

By understanding what a balanced diet looks like and how to fit it into your lifestyle you can look after your own health and wellbeing.

# WHY YOU MIGHT FIND IT DIFFICULT TO EAT WELL

We all know how important it is to eat well. However, when we're looking after someone it can be difficult to look after our own health and diet. As a carer, you may find that much of your time and energy will be focused on the needs of the person you care for. As a result, it may be difficult to prepare and eat healthy balanced meals. You may find that you struggle to eat well for some of the following reasons:

- Caring for someone can often mean a busy and demanding lifestyle, with little time to eat balanced meals. Some people may eat too much of certain types of food, resulting in weight gain, whilst others may not eat enough and therefore lose weight.
- During stressful events, such as recent bereavement, work or financial pressures, you may not feel like eating very much.
- You may also experience loss of appetite when suffering from a short-term illness, such as flu, or recovering from an injury because you may feel too sick or weak to prepare and manage normal food.
- If you are on a budget you may find it difficult to buy the foods you need for a healthy, balanced diet.

# WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT EATING WELL?

Some of the effects of not eating a healthy, balanced diet include:

- **Reduced energy and strength** — eating fewer calories (energy) and taking in less protein than your body needs can cause tiredness. Caring for someone can be exhausting so it is important you have enough energy to fuel you throughout the day.
- **Weaker immune system** — a poor nutritional intake may lead to a weaker immune system. A strong immune system is important for fighting illness as the last thing you need when caring for someone is to feel under the weather.
- **Unplanned weight loss** — you may go through periods when you have a poor appetite and don't feel like eating as much, which can be triggered by lots of things. Whatever the reason, taking in fewer calories than the body needs can lead to unintended weight loss. If your involuntary weight loss continues please speak to your GP.
- **Weight gain** — busy and demanding lifestyles can make it difficult for you to eat a healthy, balanced diet. When you need a quick energy fix it can be easy to reach for junk food and snacks, which are high in calories and low in nutrients. Whatever the reason, eating too many calories can lead to weight gain. Even if you are overweight the body may still be lacking in certain nutrients that are important for health.



# WHAT IS EATING WELL?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health for us all. This includes eating foods from all the different food groups.

Sometimes it can be a struggle to eat the right amounts of certain food groups. The eatwell guide shows the portions of the different food groups we need to eat each day to have a balanced and healthy diet. Based on the eatwell guide you should try to eat:

## Plenty of starchy food

- Bread, breakfast cereals, potatoes and pasta are a good source of energy.
- Always choose wholegrain varieties where you can.

## Plenty of fruit and vegetables

- Aim for five portions a day to provide you with a good source of vitamins and minerals. 1 portion is equivalent to: 1 apple, 1 medium banana, 1 handful of grapes, 150ml glass of unsweetened orange juice, dessert bowl of salad.\*

## Some protein

- Meat, fish, eggs, beans.

## Some milk and dairy foods

- Including cheese and yogurt; choose low-fat options if trying to reduce fat in your diet.

## Limit the amount of foods high in fat or sugar

- Crisps, chocolate, sweets.

The amount that you need to eat of the different food groups will vary depending on how active you are and if you are trying to lose or gain weight.

\*For more information on the eatwell guide, visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide>

For more information about eating well when you are caring for someone visit the Carers UK website [www.carersuk.org/nutrition](http://www.carersuk.org/nutrition)

# HOW CAN I EAT A BALANCED MEAL?

There are different ways to eat a balanced diet. Although many of us will choose to have 3 meals a day, if you are struggling to eat enough or simply don't have the time and energy to prepare 3 meals, you may find it easier to eat smaller meals more frequently throughout the day.

## TIPS FOR EATING WELL ON A BUDGET

**If you are on a budget, there are simple and affordable ways to shop for a healthy, balanced diet...**

- Use supermarket own brands as a cheaper alternative to branded products.
- Look out for offers on foods that keep, such as tins of pulses or tomatoes.
- Dried, frozen or canned fruit (in juice) and vegetables are often cheaper than fresh varieties - and just as healthy.
- Supermarkets often reduce prices on products that are close to their sell by date and this can be a great way to pick up a bargain. But be sure you can cook or eat everything you buy (or are able to freeze it) before it goes off.
- When making meals, prepare large quantities and freeze the extra portions. This can be a cost and time effective way of maintaining a balanced diet.

When you are caring it is important to make sure you are getting all the financial help you are entitled to. For expert advice contact the Carers UK Adviceline on 0808 808 777 (Monday to Friday 10am-4pm) or [advice@carersuk.org](mailto:advice@carersuk.org).



# A TYPICAL FOOD DIARY

The two food diaries below illustrate the different ways to eat a balanced diet, depending on whether you are overweight or underweight.

## TO MANAGE OR LOSE WEIGHT

**Food diary:** 3 balanced meals + 2 light snacks

**Breakfast:** Bowl of porridge made with milk, dried fruit and honey

**Snack:** 1 apple

**Lunch:** ½ large tin baked beans and 2 slices of toast

**Snack:** 1 small handful (or 30g) of natural almonds

**Dinner:** Roast chicken (1 breast or leg) with potatoes (1-2) and mixed vegetables (8 tablespoons)

**Dessert:** 1 small pot of low fat yoghurt



Remember it is also important to drink enough fluid every day (between 6-8 glasses). If you are trying to manage your weight try to avoid sugary soft and fizzy drinks.



**If you have special dietary requirements please talk to a healthcare professional before making any changes to your diet.**

### **TO GAIN WEIGHT OR IMPROVE NUTRITIONAL INTAKE**

**Food diary: 6 snacks/light meals throughout the day**

- Snack 1: Boiled egg and 1 slice of toast with butter/margarine
- Snack 2: Small bowl of cereal with whole milk and 1 banana
- Snack 3: Cup of thick and creamy chicken soup with 1 slice of toast
- Snack 4: Nourishing nutritional drink, such as Complan (available in pharmacies and the healthcare aisle in supermarkets)
- Snack 5: 1 medium baked potato with tuna mayonnaise and small bowl of salad
- Snack 6: Dessert bowl of rice pudding with stewed fruit



# TIPS FOR MANAGING OR LOSING WEIGHT

- Plan ahead! It can be easy to fall back on junk food or quick takeaways so plan meals in advance. This way you will have all the ingredients you need to prepare a balanced meal.
- Eat everything in moderation. There is no need to cut out any food group, as long as you control your portion size. For example, you can have smaller portions by using a small plate.
- Replace high fat and sugary foods with starchy options, which provide plenty of energy to fuel you through the day (such as porridge at breakfast or granary bread for your sandwich).
- Snack on high fibre foods, which can keep you feeling fuller for longer. Nuts, fruit and vegetables are high in fibre and make nutritious snacks.
- Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables. Dried, frozen or canned fruit (in juice) are just as healthy as, and often cheaper than, fresh varieties.
- As a carer it can be difficult to get enough exercise. Always try to walk when possible, take the stairs instead of escalators and consider a video workout class if you are indoors a lot.



# TIPS FOR GAINING WEIGHT OR IMPROVING NUTRITIONAL INTAKE

If you are struggling to eat a balanced diet or have simply gone off your food, here are some practical tips to help improve nutritional intake:

- Eat small, frequent meals and snacks every 2-3 hours.
- Increase intake of foods that are high in calories and protein, for example: meat, fish, eggs and full fat dairy products (like milk, yoghurt and cheese).
- When on the go, eat snacks like nuts, crackers and cereal bars, which provide plenty of energy.
- Consume nourishing drinks based on milk, such as Complan, to increase energy and protein intake.

# WHAT HAPPENS IF FOOD IS NOT ENOUGH?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet plays a key role in keeping the body strong. At times when you're tired and stressed it can be hard to get enough food, which can weaken your body and immune system.

## WHAT IS MEDICAL NUTRITION?

Medical nutrition products are specialised foods designed to meet the nutritional needs of those living with a medical condition, recovering from an illness or operation, or those who have become weak and frail over time. They are often referred to as Oral Nutritional Supplements (ONS) and are typically used for those who find it difficult to get adequate nutrition from a normal diet alone.

The nutritional composition of ONS is based on extensive scientific and clinical research, and in many cases its use is recommended in international and professional guidelines. Products are generally available in the form of a powder or liquid drink containing energy, protein, vitamins and minerals.

Medical nutrition products are usually prescribed by a healthcare professional and must be used under medical supervision.

## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ORAL NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS AVAILABLE

ONS are available in a variety of formats and styles, including milkshake-, juice-, yogurt-, and dessert-style, as well as a variety of flavours to suit different taste preferences.

High protein, nutrient-dense, low volume ONS are sometimes recommended for those who are unwell or are recovering from illness. These milkshake style drinks can help make it easier to get the energy and nutrients needed, even if the person you care for has a small appetite or is not feeling well. Many people find it difficult to finish large volumes of drinks and a low volume ONS may be preferred in these cases.

If you have any questions about the use of medical nutrition products, please speak to your healthcare professional. Further information can be found at [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org) or by calling the Nutricia Resource Centre on 0845 250 1011.

## SPEAK TO YOUR GP

If you are worried you are struggling with a normal diet, the practical tips within this leaflet can help improve nutritional intake with food. You could also ask a pharmacist whether a nutritional drink in a powdered format, such as Complan, available from supermarkets and pharmacies, is a suitable option alongside normal foods and drinks. However, should you continue to struggle, please speak to your GP or other healthcare professional about your concerns and whether medical nutrition is right for you.

Further information can be found at [www.carersuk.org/nutrition](http://www.carersuk.org/nutrition), by calling the Nutricia helpline on 0845 250 1011.



# ABOUT CARERS UK

## HOWEVER CARING AFFECTS YOU AND YOUR FAMILY, WE'RE HERE

As the UK's only national membership charity for carers, we're a supportive community and a movement for change.

We give expert advice, information and support.

We connect carers so no one has to care alone.

We campaign together for lasting change.

We innovate to find new ways to reach and support carers.

Visit our website to join us, support us or get information and advice on caring:

**[www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)**

Carers UK Helpline: **0808 808 7777**

(Monday to Friday, 9am-6pm)

**[advice@carersuk.org](mailto:advice@carersuk.org)**

# ABOUT NUTRICIA

Nutricia Ltd specialises in the delivery of medical nutrition products and services for all who need it, spanning from the very young to the elderly. We supply high quality feeds, equipment and support services to patients and healthcare professionals. Through our Nutricia Homeward service we deliver feeds, feeding pumps, equipment and nursing care direct to patients' homes.



Carers UK is working in partnership with Nutricia Ltd to help improve understanding about nutrition and caring. The partnership provides carers with information and resources on nutritional care for both themselves and the person they care for.



**Carers UK**

20 Great Dover Street  
London SE1 4LX  
[www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)

**Nutricia Ltd**

White Horse Business Park  
Trowbridge, Wiltshire BA14 0XQ  
[www.nutricia.co.uk](http://www.nutricia.co.uk)

Carers UK includes Carers Wales, Carers Scotland and Carers NI — visit our website to find out more and get in touch: [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org).

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