



Letter from Home: A Newsletter for Direct Care Providers

Menu Planning and Cooking for Clients

April 2022

Nourishment is essential to life. We turn to food for our basic dietary needs like protein, vitamins, minerals and more. But it's also a source of pleasure and comfort. That can change during older years when taste buds change, dental health can make chewing more challenging, arthritis can make food preparation painful, and medications and mood disorders can steal an appetite. Maybe just as important, many older adults are often alone and just don't feel like cooking or eating.

When possible, older adults are choosing to remain in their own homes or in a community-based setting instead of a skilled facility where meals are routinely provided. At home, a person may be able to do some of the tasks with food preparation and planning, but they may need help with others. As a direct care worker, a key function of helping to keep client's safe in their home will be to assist them in accessing proper nutritious meals. Filling in the gaps helps older adults to remain in their own homes and helps them remain as healthy as possible.

Our home care clients may have health and other lifestyle factors that can affect their ability to obtain and prepare proper nutrition independently. Some of these reasons include:

- Decreasing sense of taste and smell, which can make food less appealing.
- Decrease in saliva production, which can contribute to dry mouth.
- Reduced sense of thirst, which can increase risk for dehydration.
- Diminished sensitivity to the four primary tastes in this order: sweet, sour, bitter and salty.
- Problems with swallowing, poor dental hygiene or ill-fitting dentures can make eating difficult.
- They may be unable to afford food.
- Chronic diseases like heart problems, diabetes or digestive problems like acid reflux, affect what and how much a person can eat.
- A person with dementia may be unable to plan meals or remember to eat.
- Poor appetite may be caused by chronic disease, depression, loneliness, and inactivity.
- Older adults may have difficulty walking or standing and may be unable to shop or stand on their feet long enough to prepare meals.
- Eating alone can be difficult. It may seem too big of a task to prepare a balanced meal for oneself. The simple task of just opening a can of food may be too difficult or challenging.
- Medications too may increase or decrease appetite, cause changes in how foods taste, and/or contribute to dry mouth, constipation, diarrhea, or nausea.

If you will be required to make and prepare meals and snacks for your client, you will need to create a menu plan. A menu plan helps you get organized and simplifies the task of preparing for and shopping for a client's meals. It also helps you to ensure that your client is receiving optimum nutrition.



Letter from Home: A Newsletter for Direct Care Providers

Planning for Adequate Nutrition

As people age, the body's requirements for calories are less but the need for nutrients does not decrease, and for some nutrients the need actually increases. It is important for clients to eat a variety of foods that are nutrient dense. Nutrient dense means the nutritional value is high for the number of calories it contains. For example, an apple has many nutrients for the calories it contains-- while a donut has many calories, but few nutrients. Older adults don't require as many calories, but their need for key vitamins and minerals may remain the same or may increase. In addition, a healthy immune system needs a variety of nutrients to help prevent future infections.

The Meal Plan

Keep it Simple: First, you need to figure out what type of diet and food preferences the client may have. Does the client have any food allergies or dislikes? Sit down with the client and/or a family member and ask for family recipes or examples of the types of foods that the client enjoys, including snacks. Ask for 5-10 favorite entrees, vegetables, lunch ideas, and breakfast ideas. If the client is on a special diet, make sure the meal plan is appropriate for their dietary needs. This master list will be the basis for all your menu plans for this client. It would be ideal to have a few simple and common recipes that you carry with you to suggest to clients. These are things that you are comfortable making and can make fairly easily, such as soups, roast chicken, spaghetti or other types of pastas.

If you are only visiting the client a few times a week, but need to make meals for every day, you will need to plan for easy to reheat meal ideas. If you keep a copy of the meal plan on the client's refrigerator, they can look at what is available for them to eat at every meal.

Plan for food variety. Also, when making the meal plan include variety in the client's weekly plan. Make sure the client has a variety of types of entrees and vegetables or side dishes. A well-balanced and varied diet consists of nutrients from many different kinds of food. No one food is perfect. Also include variety in flavors. If all foods in the meal have a strong distinctive taste, they will compete with one another and overwhelm the client's taste buds. Keep the strong-flavored foods as the spotlight and milder-tasting foods as the background in the meal. Season food as the client prefers and their diet permits.

Include Texture. Combining crispy foods with smooth soft foods makes each texture seem more interesting. Unless the client is on a special diet and food texture is controlled, choose different types of texture within each meal served.

Temperature. Cook food at the correct temperature. Ask the client at what temperature he/she prefers food. Not everyone enjoys their food very hot or cold. Some people like ice in their drinks. Some do not.



Letter from Home: A Newsletter for Direct Care Providers

Taste. Cook meals to the client's taste. Discuss with the client and family which spices they like and how they usually season their food.

Consider the Budget. Does the client's budget match with the types of foods necessary for the client meal plan?

Use What Foods the Client Has in the Home. After determining the client's likes, you will then need to determine what the client already has in his/her home that can be used in making meals for the weekly plan. You would want to use up any produce or anything that may be getting ready to expire. After you determine what the client has on hand, you can make a grocery list from the prepared menu plan. Another suggestion is to use the grocery store flyer for the client's favorite grocery store to determine what is on sale that the client frequently likes to eat. This will save them money and may help you determine the menu plan for the week. For example, if chicken breasts are on sale, you may encourage the client to buy extra chicken and make a few extra meals and keep it in the freezer for future weeks.

Rotate Menus: Generally, it is best to do one weekly menu plan at a time. Keep a list of all the menu plans for future reference to rotate through. Plan for client appointments or activities; If you know a client usually feels nauseous the week after receiving chemotherapy, you would want to plan for lighter meals during this timeframe. If the client has weekly dinners with family members on Friday evening, you would not need to plan a Friday dinner for the client. Also, if you have one day when you are in the home for a longer period, you would want to make meals that have a longer prep time on that day. You may also decide to dedicate one day of your weekly visits to making multiple meals.

Prepare for leftovers. If the recipes will make leftovers, you can either freeze the extra food for another week or use it for additional meals during the week. Some clients are fine eating the same meal multiple times, while others would rather not.

Prioritize protein. Older adults should get at least 0.5 to 0.6 grams of protein per pound of body weight, or at least 20 grams every time they eat. Older adults often fall short for numerous reasons such as: animal foods can be harder to cut and chew; changing taste buds (and some medications) can make meat seem bitter; or if they cook for themselves, they may not be inclined to make a chicken breast for one. To help increase protein intake, it is best to encourage high-protein foods that are accessible, easy to eat, versatile and flavorful. Items such as cottage cheese, ricotta cheese, nut butters, eggs, frozen meatballs, chopped chicken, tuna pouches (which come in many flavors) and baked tofu (also available in many flavors) may be good options. These foods are easily mixed with other simple staples like rice, pasta, whole-grain bread and simple fruits and vegetables for easy meals that provide the protein a client needs throughout the day.

Purchasing Food Wisely

When assisting in the purchasing of packaged food, read labels. The ingredient lists on labels are critical to a person on a special diet. When helping clients choose foods for a low sodium or salt-free diet you must read the product label and see if salt was used in preparing the food item. If your client's diet



Letter from Home: A Newsletter for Direct Care Providers

restricts sugar use, watch the label for added and total sugar that has been used in the product. When working with people sensitive to certain types of foods or chemicals, you will find the label's list of ingredients helpful in planning what to buy/prepare. Often, labels contain the calories per serving of the product which might be important to a client whose caloric intake is being monitored.

Preparing a Meal

Utilize the client and family members, if at all possible, to make the preparation process fun for everyone.

Tips for meal preparation:

- Prior to cooking a meal, have everyone wash their hands.
- Wash any fresh fruits or vegetables you are using to prevent the spread of germs. If you are cutting vegetables or fruit, do not use the same knife or cutting surface that you have or will be using to cut meat products.
- Wash your hands after any contact with meat products.
- Use the oven to prepare more than one food at a time. (For example, if you are going to bake a cake, do it at the same time the casserole is heating up in the oven).
- Do not preheat the oven longer than necessary.
- Put the pot on the correct-size burner. The burner should be as close to the size of the pan as possible. Too big a burner wastes energy.
- Cover pots when they are cooking.
- Make one-dish meals.
- Make enough food for more than one meal and reheat the remaining servings.
- If you are using an electric range, turn off the heat a few minutes before the food is ready.

SERVING A MEAL

A poor appetite does not mean that the client's need for food is lowered. Clients with chronic disease or those recovering from an illness may be in a weakened condition. But the client needs as much food as ever—if not more—to return to health. The surroundings and the food served should be as cheerful, attractive, and appetizing as possible. The sight and aroma of food often make a person hungry. You can increase a client's appetite by showing him/her what she will be eating. Also, people have a better appetite for foods they especially like. Therefore, if a client asks for a particular food (and if he/she is permitted to have it), serve it. Other tips to keep in mind for serving a meal:

- Serve the client in an orderly and friendly fashion.
- Prepare small portions, especially if the client has a poor appetite. A great deal of food will only make him/her uncomfortable.
- Serve the meal as the client prefers. Some people want their soup first; some want their salad first.
- The place people eat is important. If a client enjoys eating in the living room, serve him there. If he/she would rather eat in his bedroom and you know of no reason not to, serve him/her there.

An important part of serving a client a meal is your observations about the client at mealtime:

- How is their appetite?



Letter from Home: A Newsletter for Direct Care Providers

- Does he/she eat foods on his diet?
- What foods does the client avoid?
- Is there any discomfort associated with eating?
- Does the client drink enough fluids?
- Does the client eat several big meals, or does he eat all day long?
- Who serves the client when you are not there? Are they capable of remembering to eat and reheat food?

Mealtime often is one of the highlights of the day for a client. Mealtime is a break in the often-boring routine. It gives the person something to look forward to. When the ability to plan, prepare, and serve meals diminishes, it can affect the desire to eat. Other times illness or medications make food unappealing or a prescribed diet doesn't fit usual eating habits. These are the times when direct care providers can offer variety and socialization for meals. Don't be afraid to be creative! Try new ways of setting the table, different background music, or invite various people to join the client for a meal. Figuring out ways to make a client's meal time more appealing will help them respond more positively to eating nutrient rich and fulfilling foods needed for health.



Letter from Home: A Newsletter for Direct Care Providers

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1. When preparing food:

- a. Always use the largest burner
- b. Only make enough for one serving so there will be no waste
- c. Wash your hands after handling meat
- d. Always use the oven to prepare only one food at a time

2. All the following statements are true about nutrition except that it:

- a. Gives support to clients weakened by disease
- b. Gives energy to promote activities of daily living
- c. Is needed to maintain, repair, and build new tissue
- d. All of the above

3. When planning a client meal, you must:

- a. Consider the client culture, food preference, and food availability
- b. Make only what you have been taught to cook
- c. Serve only room temperature food so as not to cause injury
- d. Ensure that the client only eat foods that are appropriate for their special diets

4. The purpose of reading food package labels is to:

- a. Help plan what to make for dinner
- b. Find information about the ingredients in the container
- c. Help you buy the greatest amount of food for the least money
- d. Locate all of the nutrients for bodily functions, which are listed on the container

5. To promote safe food handling, you should:

- a. Wash your fruits and vegetables thoroughly
- b. Use only frozen vegetables
- c. Use a single large cutting board for all fruits, vegetables and meats
- d. Throw away all left-over food