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A Table for One: The Hidden Dangers of Eating Alone

In this fast-paced world, few families make time to eat together anymore. And because eating alone—and on the go—is becoming more common, nutrition usually suffers.

That may be especially true for seniors. Cooking for one person can be harder because they have to scale down recipes, and it's also not as much fun. Instead of stimulating dinner conversation, the television becomes the other person at the table.

"Unfortunately a lot of meal choices turn out to be what's quick and easy to obtain," explains Anne Linge, a dietician at the University of Washington Medical Center in Seattle.

While many seniors are very active, others don't have the energy or ability to prepare meals for themselves. Some may have never set foot in the kitchen, or they're no longer physically able to prepare complex meals.

After her grandmother lost a considerable amount of weight in just a few months, Gretchen Kenney insisted that she move in with her and her husband, David, in Shoreline, Washington.

"She lost like 40 pounds, she just stopped eating," Kenney explains. "Part of it was her health, her arthritis; she couldn't get around very easily. She was just depressed and didn't want to eat."

After moving in with the Kenneys, her grandmother slowly put some of that weight back on.

"I make sure that she gets a much better balance," Kenney says. "Given what she wants, she would be happy with sweets and carbohydrates. She will ask for vegetables mostly because she thinks she should have them."

Inadequate nutrition can lead to a weakening of the immune system, increasing the risk of illness or infections, or contributing to mental confusion. And continued malnutrition could lead to depression, which in turn could lead to a loss of appetite—a vicious cycle.

For the elderly, other factors can contribute to malnutrition, including lack of money to buy adequate food, or transportation to the grocery store.

Linge had a client who lived directly across the street from a grocery store—but on the third floor. "She was trapped in her building because of her physical abilities and she couldn't get what she needed," Linge says. "So, when you think about your parents and their needs, think not only do they have enough income to purchase what they need, but, secondly, is shopping something they are able to do?"

Ask your loved one if they would prefer that you bring in groceries for them to cook, or that you cook for them. Be sure to ask them if they are having difficulty with chewing or swallowing, if food tastes too bland, or if they've lost their appetite (it could be because of medications they may be taking, or possibly

depression, which can have serious consequences). Also, check their refrigerator and see what kinds of food are in there, and whether any have passed the expiration date.

To alleviate the burden of cooking for one, grocery store delis have a wide variety of nutritious, pre-cooked foods, such as roasted chicken and salads with raw vegetables. A whole chicken can last a senior for several meals (but it's best not to keep it for more than three or four days; after that, it may spoil). Buy a package of vegetables or meat already cut up for stir-fry, or a pre-made meatloaf that just needs to go in the oven. If they think food is too bland, enhance the flavor with olive oil, vinegars, garlic, or spices (but not salt). Cinnamon, cloves, ginger, and turmeric are also good for the digestion.

Getting together with other people—whether seniors or not—can make cooking and eating more fun. “Sometimes seniors have been really creative and have gotten together with other seniors in their neighborhood or their building and said ‘Let’s get together and today I’ll make the meal and tomorrow you’ll make the meal,’” Linge says.

Finding a neighborhood hangout is also a good idea. “There are cafes in any community where seniors tend to gather. They will have their regulars in there who will be in there almost daily,” Linge says. “Even if you’re a party of one, you can see other people.”

Living in a retirement home or independent living or assisted living community may help some seniors eat better. “It makes a huge difference when you get residents sitting at a table together,” explains gerontologist Ashley Kraft, the “Life’s Neighborhood” Director at Aegis at Northgate in Seattle, an assisted living facility with Alzheimer’s and dementia care. “It brings back the memories of eating with your family. What happens, especially with dementia, is they forget about the things we take for granted, knowing that we’re hungry, knowing that we’re thirsty, or they don’t know how to explain that feeling.”

Little tricks can help make mealtime for your loved one more enjoyable:

- Make sure they have a comfortable place to eat; set out a nice placemat and linen napkin, or fresh flowers.
- Have a picnic in the park.
- Find a neighbor or friend for your loved one to eat with on a regular basis—have them take turns cooking the meal or cook together.
- Start (or have your loved one start) a potluck dinner club.
- If finances are not an issue, hire a personal chef to create a week’s worth of meals for the fridge and freezer, or contact a gourmet meal delivery service.
- Have your loved one join a mall walker program (they often have breakfast with others in the group after their walks).
- Have breakfast for dinner, or dinner for breakfast.
- When cooking, make extra, then freeze in single servings. Make sure to label not only what it is, but cooking instructions as well, so no one has to go hunting for cooking or reheating instructions later.
- Keep a list of what’s in the freezer or fridge on the refrigerator door; it’s easier to plan a meal when your loved one knows what she has.
- Encourage your loved one to eat congregate meals at the local senior center
- Sign up for elderly programs like Meals on Wheels www.mowaa.org/
- If your loved one has trouble chewing, puree several pieces of fruit, and add a little protein powder, for a shake full of vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Make more than one serving and put the rest in the freezer for later.

While many people may not eat as well when eating alone as they would sitting down at a family meal, there are many options to ensure adequate nutrition. Whether by finding friends to eat with, using easy-to-prepare recipes, or making a change in the living situation, your loved one can still stay healthy with your help and encouragement.

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