

Help sheet 5:

Catering for cultural groups

Providing meals for a culturally and linguistically diverse group of older people can provide a challenge. It is important to remember that unless meals with an ethnic or Indigenous flavour are authentic, people may not accept them. Consider getting advice from relatives or community groups on how to prepare traditional meals or using restaurants (a costly alternative that may be best saved for special occasions).

Food preferences

For older people who do not speak English, ask family members about their usual meal pattern and food preferences, or use a qualified interpreter to assist in assessing the older person's preferences.

A useful resource to have is: *A world of food* (Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, 1995). It includes food preference checklists in a number of languages. The checklists include questions about:

- most commonly eaten dishes
- food allergies
- likes and dislikes
- usual meal times
- significant occasions observed and meals preferred at these times
- whether there are any times during the year that fasting occurs
- beverage preferences.

There should be an understanding of the cultural significance of some foods, for example, which foods are considered holy, forbidden or only eaten by the poor. For example, in Orthodox Jewish culture, pork is viewed as unclean meat and is not to be eaten, some Europeans view pumpkin as a food fed to animals, and some Hindu people are vegans, that is, they will not consume any animal products.

It is also important to find out how strictly an individual follows the customs or rituals of their background. Someone may identify with a group but rarely eat the traditional foods of that group. Someone who has been living in Australia most of their life may have a similar diet to other Australians or may have strictly maintained their traditional diet. Those with dementia may revert back to what they were eating when they were children. Identifying the preferences and practices of each individual is important.

As with diet, different cultural groups will have preferences regarding physical activity. People from some cultures may prefer single gender group activities (for example, Muslim women) while other people may prefer traditional activities (such as tai chi for people of Chinese background).

Religious requirements

As with cultural requirements, people following religious dietary restrictions vary to the extent of their adherence. Some religions have varying degrees and lengths of fasting. It is better to assume strict adherence until otherwise advised. In some religions, the elderly or sick will be exempt from fasting.

For suppliers of kosher meals for Jewish people, check the Yellow Pages telephone directory under 'Kosher Products' or visit www.jewishaustralia.com/food.htm

Halal products for Islamic people should be sourced from specialised butchers. Your local mosque or the Islamic Council of Victoria may be able to recommend a local supplier or you may find information at www.icca.org.au

If there is any doubt about appropriate meals, it is generally acceptable to offer a vegetarian meal as most religious restrictions only concern meats or, alternatively, ask the client/carer to bring a meal from home until supplies can be obtained.

Serving food

Find out how your clients prefer to eat their meal. Do they prefer to use a knife and fork, chopsticks, a spoon, fingers or other ways? It is important to provide a finger bowl and towel if a client usually eats with their fingers.

What condiments do clients like to have on the table during mealtimes? Preferences may include salt, pepper, vinegar, salad dressing, chilli, paprika, Tabasco sauce, mayonnaise, Soya sauce, olive oil or fish sauce.

Are there other customs that clients wish to follow? Some people may be accustomed to having white crusty bread served with all of their meals. For some cultures the method of food preparation is very important.

An alternative way of addressing individual food preferences is to provide steamed food without any condiments. Clients could have access to different condiments and spices that they can add themselves to suit their tastes.

For more information

Contact relevant cultural community groups.

Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health (1995) *A world of food: a manual to assist in the provision of culturally appropriate meals for elderly people*, Canberra

Department of Human Services (2001) *Identifying and planning assistance for home-based adults who are nutritionally at risk: a resource manual*, Melbourne.

Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health www.ceh.org.au, phone: 9420 1358

Sikh Link, *Sikh patients in hospitals: a guide for health care professionals*, which includes some information on diet, fax 9886 9186, email: rks@bluep.com

The Islamic Council of Queensland, *Health care providers handbook on Muslim patients*, PO Box 204, Sunnybank, Queensland, 4109.