Help sheet no.9

Promoting independence at mealtimes

Feeding oneself is generally important to a resident as it relates to:

- improved nutrition
- sense of independence
- autonomy
- dignity
- maintaining level of function
- social nature of meals.

Physical activity, independence and nutrition

Improving strength and balance through physical activity helps to maintain an upright eating position, feed oneself, chew and swallow.

By assessing and addressing the factors listed below, staff can help residents achieve optimal independence at mealtimes.

Environmental factors

The environment can make a difference to people's interest in and ability to eat.

- Table and chair should promote optimal positioning of resident in relation to meal.
- Provide table napkins or small towels to protect residents' clothes from spills.
- Ensure adequate lighting.
- Minimise distractions – reduce noise, other activity, television.
- Place meal and utensils within resident's reach. Use assistive devices if necessary.
- Decor, design and aesthetics of the room should promote a pleasant eating environment (refer to **help sheet no 3** Quality dining room service).
- Ensure temperature is comfortable – have adequate heating and cooling.
- Provide meals in appropriate form, for example, cut up meals or provide finger foods for some residents.

Physical factors

- Ensure residents' pain is controlled at mealtimes.
- Ensure residents wear glasses at mealtimes if required.
- Encourage correct posture for eating, use cushions if necessary.
- Reposition resident if uncomfortable.
- Monitor residents' dexterity, upper limb function, range of movement - arm, wrist, elbow.
- Monitor residents' swallowing ability; oral function - dentures, chewing.
- Monitor appetite and thirst to ensure adequate intake.

Cognitive factors

- Minimise distractions and confusion, particularly for residents with dementia or cognitive impairment. For example, present one course at a time.
- Prompt and monitor residents at mealtimes when necessary.

Emotional factors

- Staff patience, encouragement and support are needed.
- Ensure the meal looks appetising through colour and texture.
- Alleviate residents' negative feelings about eating because of dependence on others and mess.

Sociocultural factors

- Ensure menu caters to needs – ethnicity, religion.
- Mealtimes are a social occasion, but not everyone enjoys being sociable all the time. Be sensitive to residents' needs and preferences and involve carers and family.

  Try different strategies to address any problems. Some will need to be addressed by other professionals, for example, for queries about posture or positioning, seek help from a physiotherapist; for queries about swallowing, seek help from a speech therapist; or if you have any queries about assistive devices and perceptual difficulties, seek help from an occupational therapist. For queries about recipes and menu planning to promote mealtime independence, seek advice from a dietitian.

What to consider when meal assistance is necessary

While providing assistance, dignity should be maintained at all times.

- Offer a variety of flavours, food colours and textures (where appropriate).
- To maximise taste, keep foods separated on the plate (mixing foods detracts from the appearance and flavour).
- Provide time for meal assistance to occur in a relaxed manner.

  Remember that dignity is at risk while being fed. Staff can practise by assisting each other to eat. Find out how it feels to not choose what you eat or in what order it is eaten. Do you know what food you are being served or serving? Are you given enough time to chew and swallow? Try this activity with a normal meal and a vitamised meal. What do you notice about your level of satisfaction with eating?

Self serve tea and coffee making facilities are beneficial for low needs residents to maintain and promote their independence.

Useful references

See www.health.vic.gov.au/agedcare/hacc/nutrition for further information.