

Help sheet no.15

Catering for people from culturally diverse backgrounds

Providing meals for a culturally diverse group of residents can be a challenge. It is important to remember that unless meals with an ethnic or indigenous flavour are authentic, they may not be accepted by residents. Consider getting advice from relatives or community groups on how to prepare traditional meals. Perhaps, on occasions, some residents could cook themselves a meal or relatives could assist. Another method to ensure authenticity could be to use restaurants. Although this is a costly alternative, it may be saved for special occasions.

Food preferences

For residents who don't speak English, ask family members about the resident's usual meal pattern and food preferences, or use a qualified interpreter to assist in assessing the resident's preferences.

A useful resource is *A world of food* (1997) developed by the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health.

A world of food includes food preference checklists in a number of languages. The checklist includes 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 and what foods may be considered holy or not allowed. For example, in Orthodox Jewish culture, pork is viewed as unclean and is not to be eaten.

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 maintained their traditional diet. Those with dementia may revert back to their childhood diet. Identifying the preferences and practices of each individual is important.

Serving food

Find out how your residents 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 resident usually eats with their fingers.

What condiments do residents like to have on the table during mealtimes? Preferences may include salt, pepper, vinegar, salad dressing, chilli, paprika, tabasco sauce, curry paste, mayonnaise, soy sauce, olive oil or fish sauce.

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.

As a way of addressing residents' taste preferences, provide a range of different condiments and spices that residents can add themselves to cooked foods.

Alternatively, some homes purchase pre-prepared frozen meals to provide culturally appropriate food to residents on some or all days of the week.

More information

Contact relevant cultural community groups.

For example, the Australian-Polish community has published a resource manual, *Polish seniors in Melbourne - resource manual*, with information on customs and food for older people in the Polish community. For copies, contact the community at 77 Droop St, Footscray 3011, phone 9689 9170, fax 9687 7446.

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

From Big Ben to Chow Mein - strategies for the development of ethnic food services, Migrant Health Unit, Hunter Area Health Service 1991 State Health Publication No (HAHS 91-111).

Wood, Bacon, Stewart and Race, Department of Human Services Home and Community Care Program (1998) *Identifying and assisting home based frail elderly people who are nutritionally at risk - a resource manual*, Department of Human Services 2001.

www.health.vic.gov.au/agedcare/hacc/nutrition