

# Food, nutrition and wellbeing an intrinsic link



Wellbeing is considered to be a state of feeling comfortable, healthy and happy. Sophie Murray, head of nutrition and hydration at Sunrise Senior Living and past deputy chair of the NACC, looks at the link between wellbeing and food in two ways: the physiological benefits and the dining experience.



## FOODS AND FLUIDS FOR WELLBEING

Physiologically, food can support positive mental health. There are many research papers that show that some foods can help us feel better. A Mediterranean-style diet supplemented with fish oil, for example, may reduce the symptoms of depression.

Many research papers have concluded that our gut can reflect how we're feeling. If we're

stressed, for example, it can speed up or slow down the functioning of the digestive system. Healthy food to support our gut includes foods that produce or contain beneficial bacteria. These include many fruits, vegetables, legumes and live yoghurts, and in some studies have been found to promote serotonin, a brain chemical linked with feeling good and stabilising mood. Stress is thought to suppress this.

Our beneficial bacteria have many other benefits, although as they are, by nature, live, they can be easily destroyed and overpopulated with bacteria that cause negative effects. One nursing home ran a trial where residents were given a yoghurt with a bacteria strain every day, finding positive effects on general health.

Your brain and nervous system depend on good nutrition to produce new proteins cells

and tissue. Complex carbohydrates, lean proteins and healthy fats are good foods that can help to feed the brain, as well as a range of fruit and vegetables. These foods also digest, absorb and metabolise slowly, so they don't spike your blood sugar as much and lead to a steady energy state if eaten in the right portion size.

Some processed foods (including ice cream, chocolate bars and coffee) release dopamine, which is a 'feel good' chemical in the body and continued eating can cause a dopamine tolerance, which fuels more consumption of such foods and cravings. These foods can also promote negative effects such as depression, fatigue and inflammation in the body and brain due to their other properties, such as high sugars and high saturated fat. Dopamine release has been linked with cravings and food addictions. The good news is, however, that there are healthy foods that also release dopamine, including olive oil, bananas, green leafy vegetables and avocado.

A little more about unhealthy foods. They can prevent the conversion of other foods into nutrients the brain needs (for example, saturated fat such as butter, lard and palm oil) and on a final note, if excessive consumption of these foods goes on to cause obesity, feelings of sluggishness can prevail and worsen wellbeing.

Let's not forget hydration, the kingpin in feeling energised and alert. Almost any fluid helps hydration, excluding alcoholic spirits. Some fluids also help nutrient state. Water is great but not enjoyed by all. Coffee may have positive and negative effects but is still hydration. Tea is often favoured in care homes and is lower in caffeine than coffee, which for some is important.

### AGEING AND A BALANCED DIET

As we age, appetites may decrease alongside activity, but the body's need for the same nutrients remains almost the same (there are some age-related conditions that alter our intake need, such as women needing less iron after the menopause).

However, our digestion may not work as well and we may not absorb nutrients as effectively, so there is a need to take in more nutrients to make sure they reach the parts of the body where they are needed. Ageing also increases inflammatory processes further, creating a risk factor for multiple diseases, such as chronic kidney disease, diabetes mellitus, cancer, depression, dementia, and sarcopenia. Diets that help reduce inflammation include antioxidants such as vitamin C or carotenoids, often found in brightly coloured fruit and vegetables.

### THE CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING HEALTHIER DIETS IN A CARE SETTING

Menus should be informed by the food likes and dislikes of residents. Food is to be enjoyed on one level, and is clinically and physiologically

needed on another, especially if a person is at risk of losing weight and becoming malnourished. There may also be dental or swallowing problems that can affect the ability to eat.

Critically, a skilled, comprehensive and informed menu planning approach and off-the-menu provision are so important. Examples of activities that can improve the existing provision of nutritional menus include food taster events, daily nutritionally enhanced social events, useful information on nutrition for residents, and food provenance management.

Softer foods can be really popular, and many vegetables and plant-based foods are soft. A great dip selection and vegetable pâtés can provide tasty snacks. Similarly, soup and smoothies can be enhanced greatly with nutrition.

### ENVIRONMENT AND WELLBEING

Whether an individual lives in a residential home or their own home, there is one commonality – mealtimes. For a great many of us, mealtimes are the punctuating points of the day. In residential care, this creates an opportunity to come together and share the experience.

This is best likened to hospitality. By definition, this may be seen as the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers. Care homes provide hospitality, although training in this area may not be high on the agenda. The

hospitality industry is based around giving a great experience to customers. Memorable dining is what keeps them coming back. In the same way, mealtimes and social events themed with food also help residents to look forward to food and drink and promotes their wellbeing.

This can be achieved with inspired hospitality staff (this may be the chef or activity staff) and informed, thoughtful planning that caters for everyone. In many care homes, afternoon food events that are socially based are popular, and these can be themed as simply as high tea at three o'clock or based on a calendar event such as Valentine's Day or Wimbledon. Nutrition can easily be brought into these occasions and they don't have to be cake based each time! Think of fruit salads, vegetable cakes and small shots of drinks boosted with nutrients. Carrot cake is an easy start for a vegetable cake. Loaded with vegetables and nuts it promotes the nutrition mentioned earlier on. A vegetable cake repertoire can be extended to include innovative cakes, such as courgette and lemon, fruit and nuts, parsnip and date, banana and sweet potato loaf, and so on. There are also protein-based flours that can add fibre to cakes.

Food, nutrition and wellbeing are intrinsically linked. If care and catering teams have an interest in nutrition, training in hospitality, and a flair for innovation, then we have the perfect combination for nutrition and menu planning that meets wellbeing beautifully.

