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# MOTOR NEURON DISEASE

## FACT SHEET No 8

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### **BENEFITS OF HEALTHY NUTRITION**

What you eat is really important. Well balanced, nutritious meals are vital to maintain good health, energy levels, reduce falls risk, fight infections and support healthy bladder and bowel functions.

Food generally has been divided up into five groups. Eating a variety of foods from all these groups ensures that all your nutrient requirements are met. It is based on plant foods such as breads, cereals, vegetables, legumes and fruit and contains moderate amounts of low fat animal foods such as milk products, lean meat, fish, poultry and eggs with small amounts of oils and healthy fats.

#### **Breads and Cereals**

These foods provide carbohydrate, dietary fibre and protein and are a good source of many vitamins and minerals.

Wholegrain, wholemeal, soy and linseed are the best choices. They provide the most nutrients and are rich in fibre, which helps to prevent constipation. The best breakfast cereals are made from whole grains and contain more than 3% fibre.

Eat at least 4 serves each day:

#### **Fruit and Vegetables**

These provide fibre too and are an excellent source of vitamins - particularly vitamin C and Folate, carbohydrate, antioxidants and minerals, which help to improve resistance to infection and enhance all aspects of health.

Eat a wide variety of vegetables every day, including starchy vegetables, yellow/orange, green leafy vegetables, salads and legumes.

These may be fresh, frozen, or canned and can be eaten fresh or lightly cooked.

Fresh fruit is always best, but tinned fruit is a convenient alternative. Pure fruit juices may be used but less frequently as they do not contain fibre. Limit dried fruit to only one serve a day.

If your appetite is small eat smaller serves of vegetables so that you still have room for all the other nutritious foods too.

Aim for 5 serves from this group each day

#### **Meat, Fish, Poultry and alternatives such as Legumes, Lentils, Dried Beans, Eggs, Nuts, and Vegetarian Protein Foods**

These foods are a source of protein, iron, fats and other minerals. Protein is used for the repair and growth of new body cells and is important for maintaining and building muscles. Strong muscles help to make breathing and movement easier and reduce risk of falls.

Choose lean cuts of white and red meat and trim off all fat. Remove the skin from chicken before cooking. Add healthy oils only where necessary. Sausages and processed meat are high in animal fat so only eat them occasionally.

Try some legumes – dried beans, peas, lentils (in soup or added to salads and meat dishes). They are a rich source of fibre and provide valuable vitamins and minerals as well as protein.

Eat one serve each day

#### **Milk, Milk Products or Calcium Fortified Non-dairy Alternatives**

These foods are the richest sources of calcium and are a valuable source of protein. They include milk, yoghurt, cheese, custard, calcium-fortified soymilk, soy yoghurt or soy custard.

Choose low fat varieties unless you are underweight. If you have recently lost weight, then full cream dairy milks and low fat soy products are best choices.

Eat two-three serves each day

### **Fluids**

It is most important to drink adequate amounts of fluid to assist your kidneys excrete waste products from food and medications. An adult usually needs about two litres or eight glasses of fluid a day and more if the weather is hot.

Choose water, weak teas, weak coffee, and diluted unsweetened fruit juice, (low joule soft drinks and cordials if you are overweight). Drinking at regular times during the day helps you to remember to drink, or try to keep sipping frequently.

Not drinking enough can contribute to constipation, dehydration, a dry mouth, swallowing difficulties and urinary tract infections.

If you are prone to urinary tract infections, you may find that drinking juices such as cranberry, apple and apricot helpful. These juices make your urine more acid and slow bacterial growth.

Caffeine acts as a diuretic in some people so limit the number of caffeine containing drinks and make sure you drink extra fluids.

### **Fats and Oils**

Some fats and oils assist in general health but the amount you need is often small. Interestingly your brain contains over 50% fat most of which is a polyunsaturated type of fat called omega-3. This polyunsaturated fat along with others is important for nerve signal transmission and cell communication.

Omega 3 fats are found in larger amounts in a few seed oils such as Canola, Sunola, olive and linseed oils as well as omega 3 rich margarine, oily fish and walnuts.

They have been best known for their ability to reduce raised blood cholesterol levels but are

being increasingly recognized as also having a protective role in neurological function

Always avoid fats such as those found in fatty meat, butter commercial pastries, biscuits, cakes and fried foods.

### **Extra Foods**

Some foods do not fit well into any of the five food groups and it is not essential that you eat them for good health. They are a part of our culture though and can add to the enjoyment of eating. Unfortunately they are often rich in unhealthy fat, salt and sugar and because of this, it is best only to have these foods occasionally or in small amounts especially if you are trying to lose weight.

### **Weight Loss**

Every one has a weight range that is just right for them. If you are too thin through not eating sufficient food, you may find that you fatigue easily and recover more slowly from infections and illness.

Many people with MND who need to eat soft foods are concerned that they are not receiving sufficient nutrition. There may be weight loss as muscle is lost through wasting or a loss of fat tissue. If this occurs there is a lot that can be done to fortify your existing meals. Nutritious supplements such as Sustagen can also provide valuable energy and nutrients to supplement your daily intake.

Should the need arise when a meal is missed a cup of Hospital Formula Sustagen could replace that meal. However if this occurred on a more regular basis, it would be highly desirable to seek professional dietary assistance to ensure you receive sufficient nutrition for ongoing health maintenance.

If you need to regain weight or are having difficulty maintaining your weight, add extra margarine rich in omega 3 unsaturated fats, healthy oils, nuts, and energy dense carbohydrate and starch rich foods.

As MND affects each person individually the best way to meet your needs can be in discussion with a Dietitian, particularly one with an interest in MND. It is also important

of course to report any sudden weight loss to your Doctor.

### **Overweight**

Carrying extra weight can make it harder to move and so also increases your fatigue level. The most effective way to lose weight is to increase your activity level as well as reduce your overall Kilojoule intake.

Fatty foods, added sugars, lollies and some fast foods are not only fattening but may aggravate MND symptoms so are best minimized.

You may choose to increase your activity by going for a regular walk or swim, or through more informal ways such as gardening etc. Whatever you do, it is important that you choose something that fits your physical abilities and that you enjoy.

Regular gentle activity will also help to:

- keep your muscles and bones strong
- maintain bowel and bladder functions
- reduce feelings of fatigue
- give you a feeling of well being

### **Fatigue**

Fatigue can lead to a loss of appetite, reduced activity and because of the effort required, you may find that your interest in preparing food diminishes. Even though you may not feel like eating your body still needs food. Here are some hints that you may find useful:

- eat three small meals a day with 2-3 regular nutritious snacks
- try having prepared meals delivered
- buy frozen prepared meals that can be microwaved or heated easily.
- prepare extra food when you cook and freeze it
- buy pre-chopped or frozen vegetables
- select grated instead of block cheese
- use a home delivery service for your grocery shopping
- keep a stock of basic foods that require little preparation such as pasta, tinned fish or meats, frozen mixed vegetables and jars of ready prepared sauces and milk based desserts.
- prepare meals and cut them up ahead of time so when you come to eat them your

energy can be used entirely for eating, chewing and swallowing.

### **Constipation**

Constipation may be the result of your MND, medication or your personal habits. You may find these three tips helpful:

- Eat more fibre. Dietary fibre is the part of your food that is not digested or absorbed. It is found in foods such as wholemeal bread, cereals made from wholegrains or with added bran, nuts, seeds, vegetables, fruit and legumes. (Animal products do not contain any fibre.).
- AND drink plenty of fluid. Fibre works by absorbing fluid to increase stool size and softness.
- AND be more active.

### **Possible Eating Difficulties**

With the progression of MND, eating becomes more of a chore and strategies may be needed to help you maintain independence.

If at all possible you should feed yourself. However, it is important to stress that you should not be pushed or urged to do so if you have insufficient energy.

If eating becomes tiring, it may be easier to eat five or six small meals rather than three large ones and eat earlier in the day before you become too tired later in the evening.

Sufficient time should be provided for eating. Rushing increases anxiety, making choking a greater risk and usually results in eating less than normal.

Most people with MND benefit from eating with the family rather than alone but you should not be the focus of the family's attention during meals. The family should engage in normal meal time conversations; and you should be included, especially by eye contact, in the conversation. Even if your speech is affected your understanding is not!

If you are having difficulty chewing and swallowing, you may find changing the consistency and texture of your food helpful. soft foods require less chewing. Try mashed potato instead of fried, stewed fruit and

cooked vegetables instead of raw. The addition of sauces can greatly increase the ease of swallowing food.

If you have any difficulties with chewing or swallowing it is strongly suggested you see a Speech Pathologist as they can give you valuable assistance.

Occupational Therapists can provide special cutlery to assist you with self-feeding too.

### **Gastrostomy or PEG Tubes**

The most important encouragement health professionals can give you is that unintentional weight loss reduces your muscle bulk and strength adding to your overall weakness, falls risk and fatigue.

This is best treated early rather than avoided until you are unwell. Early placement of a Gastrostomy Tube will reduce your fatigue and the length of time required eating your meals. It assists you to maintain full nutrient and fluid intake and allows you eat for your enjoyment. Remember you still need to follow the specific guidelines of your Speech Pathologist regarding food textures when eating or drinking.

### **Special Diets**

There are many diets and nutrition theories that are claimed to be helpful for people with MND but many have been proven to be of no therapeutic value. Some of these are nutritionally balanced while others may actually be detrimental for your health.

There is always a concern that when patients are very anxious to gain all the perceived

benefits from any food that they can be drawn into dietary food and supplemental excesses or extremist nutrient deprivation. The risks are not just on a physiological level but of unnecessary costs, which seriously affect the person's ability to purchase nutritious foods and enhance their daily lifestyle.

What you eat is really important. A Dietitian with an interest in MND can assist you with an individualized and ongoing plan for well balanced, nutritious meals, which are vital for maximising your ongoing health and assisting in the protection of your neurological system.

data:mnd:factsheets:8  
March 2005

### **For more information, or support, contact**

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