

The Unseen US Health Crisis of Malnutrition

Malnutrition is a largely misunderstood, yet growing, serious, and costly health crisis in the United States. As many as 1 in 3 hospitalized patients is malnourished upon admission to the hospital.

Did you know that:⁽¹⁾

- 45% of patients who fall in the hospital are malnourished
- Patients with malnutrition and weight loss have 3 times the risk for surgical site infection?
- Patients with malnutrition and weight loss are at increased risk for hospital readmission?

The good news? We can address the crisis of malnutrition in our country.

Malnutrition is preventable and treatable.

By addressing challenges such as the limited awareness and recognition of the severity of malnutrition and the lack of coverage for effective treatments, we can help to lessen the incidence and impact of malnutrition across the US.

What is Malnutrition?

Many people think malnutrition refers only to people who are undernourished and appear emaciated. However, malnutrition is actually a broad term defined as the insufficient, excessive, or imbalanced consumption of nutrients – and, yes, many people in the US are malnourished too. People who are malnourished can appear to be overweight, underweight, or perfectly “healthy.”

Being malnourished places Americans at risk for serious health consequences and creates significant costs to the US healthcare system.

A misperception is that malnutrition only impacts 3rd world countries. However, many Americans are malnourished due to contributing causes such as poor diet, chronic disease.

What is the Impact of Malnutrition?

Poor nutrition or malnutrition can result in the loss of lean body mass, leading to complications that negatively impact a broad range of health outcomes and increase healthcare costs, including:

- Reduced recovery from surgery/ disease
- Impaired wound healing
- Increased susceptibility to illness/ infection
- Risk for falls
- Longer hospital stays
- Increased hospital readmissions
- Prolonged stays in rehabilitation facilities
- Earlier admission to long-term care residential facilities, such as nursing homes

Addressing Malnutrition: The Value of Therapeutic Nutrition

Positive health outcomes in many chronic diseases, such as diabetes mellitus, heart disease, renal disease, and obesity, are in large part determined by compliance with diet and nutrition guidelines and the provision of nutrition as therapy.

Therapeutic nutrition is defined as a medically-indicated special diet, the use of specific nutrients, disease-specific nutrition products, and complete and balanced oral nutrition supplements to help manage a health problem.

Just as a wealth of research confirms the negative outcomes and high costs of malnutrition, many studies confirm the benefits of nutrition intervention for poorly nourished patients. These benefits include:

- Decreased complications and morbidity
- Decreased mortality
- Improved quality of life
- Increased total energy and protein intake
- Improved appetite in different patient populations, particularly the elderly

A recent study showed that oral nutritional supplements provided during hospitalization were associated with a⁽²⁾:

- 21.0% decrease in length of stay
- 21.6% decrease in episode cost—approximately \$4,734 in savings

Malnutrition is a common problem that often leads to hospitalization. Oral nutritional supplementation can help decrease hospitalization costs and length of stay⁽³⁾.

CALL TO ACTION

Whether you are a healthcare provider, patient, caregiver, employer, advocate or institution, here's how you can take action:

- Visit: www.malnutrition.com to access the latest care models, nutrition resources, evidence, and experts to learn more about improving nutrition care and patient outcomes.
- Visit: www.familiesandwork.org/nutrition-toolkit
- Speak to your state Department of Health about adding a focus on malnutrition to their obesity plan, and about including nutrition screening and therapeutic nutrition intervention into their quality healthcare initiatives and care models.
- Advocate for both employee and retiree health plans, to provide coverage for oral nutrition supplements when recommended by a physician.
- Advocate for maintenance of Medicaid coverage of oral nutrition supplements for at-risk populations in your state.



Washington DC Center on Aging



Shepherd Wellness
Community

Wellness for people affected by HIV/AIDS



ACADEMY OF NUTRITION & DIETETICS
ACADEMY OF NUTRITION AND DIETETICS

Funding for this publication provided by Abbott Nutrition.

References:

(1) Tappenden KA, Quatrara B, Parkhurst ML, Malone AM, Fanjiang G, Ziegler TR. Critical Role of Nutrition in Improving Quality of Care: An Interdisciplinary Call to Action to Address Adult Hospital Malnutrition. JPEN J Parenter Enteral Nutr. 2013 Jul; 37(4):482-97. doi: 10.1177/0148607113484066. Epub 2013 Jun 4.

(2) Phillipson et al, Am J Manag Care. 2013;19(2):121-128

(3) Stratton RH, Green CJ, Elia M. Disease-Related Malnutrition: An Evidence Based Approach to Treatment. Wallingford: CABI Pub; 2003.