

Partners in Wellness (PIW)

Nutrition Education to Reduce Malnutrition in Older Adults

Purpose: To improve the nutrition and lifestyle of older adults in North Carolina by identifying nutritional risks and intervening with nutrition education.

Strategy: Develop and present an interactive nutrition education program targeting limited-resource, food stamp-eligible older adults. Each session involves group interaction, skill building, taste testing, and a variety of activities designed to influence behavior change. Participants learn about better eating habits. Activities address the top 10 identified risk factors for malnutrition in older adults. The program is designed for maximum learning based on brain research for memory retention and age-specific needs.

Why is PIW Needed?

- **Older adults are North Carolina's fastest growing population segment.**
 - 16% of the State's total population (1,341,371) is age 60 and older.
 - North Carolina's older population increased by 20.5% between 1990 and 2000, far higher than the national rate of 12%, and the number of persons 65 and older is expected to more than double in the next 20 years.

- **Older adults are particularly subject to the ill effects of malnutrition**
 - 80% of adults 65 and over suffer from chronic diseases and conditions, many of which are associated with malnutrition.
 - Poverty contributes significantly to malnutrition. And poverty affects older adults on limited incomes particularly hard. As the cost of health care, medications and utilities increases, many people cut back on their food budget to pay for other necessities.

The Top Ten Risk Factors for Malnutrition (In Order of Prevalence)

1. Eating alone
2. Living alone
3. Having a diet-related chronic disease
4. Taking three or more different drugs per day
5. Poor appetite
6. Lacking enough money to buy food
7. Eating two or fewer meals per day
8. Not eating enough fruits, vegetables and dairy products
9. Chewing difficulties from missing teeth or gum disease
10. Unintentional weight gain or weight loss

PIW Makes Significant Impact on the Eating Habits of Older Adults at Risk for Malnutrition

Of the 1,348 older adults served by county agents last year, 75% were at moderate or high risk of malnutrition. Measured results included:

- **80% of the participants completed a personal plan of action** to lower their risk for malnutrition based on the information they had learned.
- **75% showed they had gained knowledge of at least one thing** that they could do to lower their risk for malnutrition. This included: the importance of talking with their doctor or pharmacist about what foods to eat with certain medications; the importance of eating dairy products; and the importance of having regular dental check-ups.
- **78% made at least one behavior change to lower their risk for malnutrition**, such as: eating five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, trying a variety of foods, and comparing the prices of food items to get the best buy.
- **Significant improvements made by participants:**
 - Paying attention to diet as a way of staying healthy
 - Making healthy food choices when eating out
 - Eating moderate portions when eating out
 - Trying new foods and recipes
 - Eating well even when medications affect appetite
 - Eating a variety of foods for better health

PIW IS A Collaborative Project Among:

- The North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service (at North Carolina State University [NCSU] and in 50 counties)
- North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Division of Aging
- Institute for Health, Science and Society
- The Departments of Psychology and Political Science at NCSU

North Carolina Is a National Leader in the Partners in Wellness Program

This concept has served as a success model at Georgia State University, Michigan State University, Penn State University and Kansas State University. Other colleges and universities expressing interest in the program are the University of Florida, Ohio State University, Colorado State University, St. Louis University and Meredith College.