

Meals on Wheels Helps Elders Maintain Good Nutrition

By Houkje Ross

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The nutrition needs of older Americans are complex, says Jean Lloyd, a nutrition specialist for the Administration on Aging (AoA). For example, older adults often don't get enough daily nutrients or fluids, which can affect the way medications work, Lloyd says. Vitamin A and D are extremely important.

There are also critical differences in nutrition needs across the spectrum of the aging population. For example, an 85 year-old is more likely to have problems with diminished appetite than a 60 year-old, Lloyd explains. This can mean not feeling hungry and not eating at a time when nutrients are becoming more important.

Other reasons for not getting enough nutrients may include not being able to get to the grocery store or not being able to cook due to illness. Struggling to pay the costs of medications, dentures, or a hearing aid may mean cutting back on groceries. The challenge is that becoming older often means having to pay more attention to what you eat, Lloyd says.

To ensure that elders receive at least one nutritious, appetizing, and culturally appropriate meal a day, the Older Americans Act mandates funding for a national nutrition program called the Elderly Nutrition Program, also known as Meals on Wheels.

AoA administers grants to state and community programs on aging, which then provide nutrition services such as meals or nutrition education. AoA also provides funds to tribal organizations to serve American Indian elders.

Through Meals on Wheels, seniors can receive meals at home or in a group setting such as a senior center. The

program serves more than three million elders aged 60 and over. All those 60 and over are eligible, but the program targets those in greatest need.

Older adults often contribute funds and volunteer their time, says Lloyd. Volunteers at the community level, funding from private or state sources, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture help support the program.

Between 80 and 90 percent of those participating in Meals on Wheels have incomes below 200 percent of the poverty level, according to AoA. A large percent of those served by the program are minorities, Lloyd says.

Nearly four times as many Meals on Wheels participants are low-income minorities, compared with the overall population aged 60 and older.

An added benefit of the program is that it keeps elders connected to the community, says Lloyd. More than twice as many program participants live alone compared with the overall elderly population (60 percent versus 25 percent), according to AoA.

When asked what they like most about the program, 77 percent of those who receive meals in a group setting and 70 percent of those who receive meals at home mentioned interacting with the other participants, according to an AoA report.

"It's a good way for elders to find out about other community programs, to find a job, get physical activity, or find a volunteer opportunity, Lloyd says.

For more information on the program, call AoA's Eldercare Locator at (800) 677-1116, or browse AoA's Web site at: <http://www.aoa.gov>. ❖

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