



Title: Get Nourished: preventing, identifying and treating malnutrition in older people in Dundee

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Description

This project used five initiatives to prevent and improve the detection and management of malnutrition in older people in Dundee. The project had started in 2019 and it was predicted that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic would exacerbate nutritional risk in older people due to restricted access to shopping and a reduction in essential care and support. Restrictions on face-to-face activities required innovative ways of working and partnership with a number of organizations. It has resulted in increased awareness and detection of malnutrition risk, improved access to first line nutritional advice, improved nutritional intake, reduced social isolation and enabled delivery of accessible, consistent nutritional training.

Context

It is estimated that one in ten people over the age of 65 are malnourished or at risk of malnutrition. It is both a cause and consequence of ill-health but is often overlooked¹. Research has shown that providing timely first line nutritional advice can prevent further disease as well as protect people from falls and frailty and improve recovery time following illness².

It was predicted that the COVID-19 pandemic would exacerbate nutritional risk due to limited access to shopping and a reduction in essential care and support³. Restrictions on face-to-face activities required innovative ways of working and partnership with a number of organisations.

The aim of this project was to prevent and improve the detection and management of malnutrition in older people in Dundee, while working within the restraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and consisted of five objectives:

1. To increase awareness and detection of malnutrition risk through use of nutritional screening
2. To increase access to nutritional advice by establishing a telephone advice line
3. To deliver nutritious snacks (Boost Boxes) to people identified as being at risk of malnutrition

4. To provide support to vulnerable people through a weekly meal delivery service and social check in
5. To increase access to standardised nutrition training by developing online training videos

Method

Staff from the NHS Tayside Falls Prevention Team and volunteers from the Royal Voluntary Service were trained to use the Patients Association Nutrition Checklist (PANC)⁴ to identify people at risk of malnutrition, give basic advice and signpost to services for further support. PANC was chosen instead of the Malnutrition Universal Screening Tool (MUST) as it is simpler to complete remotely because it does not require measurement of height or weight. PANC has been shown to have moderate agreement with MUST when used to screen for the prevalence of malnutrition risk in older adults in the community⁶.

A telephone advice line was established for people concerned about malnutrition risk either in themselves or someone they care for. It was manned by trained healthcare support workers for three hours on three days per week. Additionally, the service could be accessed via a dedicated email account. Information was gathered from individuals using a locally produced, standardised form and they were then provided with first-line nutritional advice and signposted or referred to other services where appropriate. The advice line was publicised using posters in GP surgeries and community pharmacies, social media platforms and emailing multiple partner agencies.

People identified as being at risk of malnutrition either through nutritional screening or after calling the telephone advice line were offered Boost Boxes. These contained 14 high energy/ high protein snacks such as milk puddings, malt loaf, dried fruit and drinking chocolate powder and were designed to provide extra nourishment when appetite was reduced. The content of the boxes was adapted for anyone with special dietary requirements. Trained volunteers from Dundee Volunteer and Voluntary Action delivered the Boost Boxes, reviewed their use weekly and refilled the boxes where appropriate for up to three weeks. Ideas for suitable snacks were discussed if appetite remained reduced after the three-week period, enabling self-management of long term conditions to prevent avoidable admissions to hospital or care homes.

An existing supper club, which had been providing a fortnightly evening meal to 30 diners, was adapted to provide a weekly meal delivery service and social check-in. People who were identified as at risk of social isolation by partners or community members were referred to the Community Development Worker, who would then assess whether the service was appropriate for the individual. Meals were cooked by staff in a local school that had been furloughed and delivered by healthcare support workers. Additionally they received weekly telephone calls to reduce social isolation. Funding for the Boost Boxes and meals was obtained from the Scottish Government Covid Response Fund.

Short training videos were developed and made available on YouTube to address the following topics:

- Signs and symptoms of undernutrition
- Food Fortification
- Nourishing Drinks
- How to fortify your milk
- Get Nourished Advice Line

Outcomes

Feedback from those trained to use the PANC⁴ indicated that it was easy to use.

Over a one year period, 70 people called the advice line, with the majority of callers (80%) seeking advice for themselves. On review, 51% of callers reported that they had been able to fully implement the advice provided and 25% had implemented it partially. Twenty-two percent of callers were referred to the Nutrition and Dietetic Service for more specialist support. Almost half of the callers had been signposted to the advice line by the Falls Prevention Team.

Over a one-year period, 48 people were identified as requiring support due to poor appetite and over 150 Boost Boxes were delivered as some required support for longer than three weeks. No referrals to other services were required. Initially there were regular referrals but this decreased over time. Approximately seven people were receiving Boost Boxes at any one time.

Between March and October 2020, over 3000 meals were delivered and over 1600 phone calls were made, providing support, advice and companionship to older people across Dundee. An evaluation survey was issued to 24 households and 16 responses were received. These 24 households were selected as they were within the geographical area of the existing supper club. The survey asked in which ways the service had helped them and the results are shown below.

	Yes	No
I am better nourished	15	1
I am more socially connected to my community	16	0
I am physically healthier	15	1
My mental health has improved	15	1
My general and emotional wellbeing has improved	14	2
I am less lonely	14	2
I feel valued and supported by the community	16	0
My overall morale has improved	16	0

One recipient commented “It has helped me a great deal especially as I have no family nearby. Getting a phone call and knowing where to turn for support is brilliant. I really appreciate everything. I would like to come to the supper club when it starts up again.”

Use of videos enabled training and information to be shared quickly, efficiently and consistently. Each video has been viewed approximately 100 times and care home staff reported that they found the one on Food Fortification particularly helpful.

Key learning points

Five partner organisations were involved in this project and it would not have been possible without strong partnership working.

There have been fewer calls to the advice line than expected. This highlights the need for a communication plan to ensure greater awareness of the service. Red flag signs should be agreed to allow identification of those requiring urgent referral to other services.

Many people offered Boost Boxes were given advice to fortify their milk. Therefore, skimmed milk powder was later added to the boxes to make it easier to implement this advice. Some of those referred for a box had often complex and chaotic lives and food insecurity was the main issue rather than poor appetite. Availability of Boost Boxes needs to be continuously advertised to promote their use.

As restrictions were eased, the supper club was replicated in other areas within Dundee.

As a follow-up to the videos that were developed in-house, a series of professionally produced training videos⁶ on preventing, identifying and treating malnutrition have now been developed. These are endorsed by the Care Inspectorate and care providers across Scotland include them within their mandatory training.

This project was undertaken at a time when restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a change in working practices. If circumstances had allowed collection of baseline data and evidence of economic impact, this would have strengthened the outcome data of the project.

References

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