

Nutrition for Older Australians

Priorities for the 2022 Federal Budget

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Contact Person: Kate Thiele
Position: Executive Director
Organisation: Meals on Wheels® Australia
Address: PO Box 406, Unley SA 5602
Telephone: 08 8273 1304
Email: australia@mealsonwheels.org.au

Nutrition for Older Australians Alliance

This submission was prepared by an alliance of industry leaders, who seek to improve and protect the nutritional health and well-being of older Australians, (70 years and over).

Members of the Nutrition for Older Australians Alliance (NOAA) include:

- Dietitians Australia
- Nutrition Australia
- The Maggie Beer Foundation
- Meals on Wheels® Australia, and
- The Public Health Association of Australia



"I applaud this initiative and am so pleased to be invited to the working group"

Maggie Beer, 27 January 2022

The Nutrition for Older Australians Alliance would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of:

Professor Karen Walton PhD AdvAPD
Associate Dean Education
Faculty of Science, Medicine & Health

Recommendations

1. Fund the development of a specific set of Dietary Guidelines for over 70 years of age, drawing on revised Nutrient Reference Values for people over 70 years.
2. Fund successful public education, implementation support, monitoring and evaluation of the Dietary Guidelines for older Australians, over 70 years.

Discussion

Australian Dietary Guidelines

Recommendation 1: Fund the development of a specific set of Dietary Guidelines for people over 70 years of age, drawing on revised Nutrient Reference Values for people over 70 years.

COST

- \$2.5 million

BENEFITS

- Ensuring specific, evidence-based Nutrient Reference Values (NRVs) are in place will assist to create greater awareness of what the nutritional requirements are for people over 70 years of age. This awareness will lead to the provision of appropriate foods, support the development of dietary guidelines, and positively impact nutrition.
- Dietary Guidelines for people over 70 years of age, will provide clear and consistent information about healthy and enjoyable foods to provide this consumer group. They will provide guidance on nutritional requirements, variety, food groups, fortification where needed and food safety.
- Dietary Guidelines for older Australians will support better nutrition outcomes and ultimately health in this population. Improving nutritional status can help reduce the risk of hip fractures, lower disease risk and improve quality of life.
- The Guidelines will set a food and nutrition benchmark for aged care regulators, providers, food services and consumers. They will set a standard for the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission to monitor and measure food services and nutritional care needs against. This will improve understanding and capacity within the aged care sector and the community to adequately meet the nutritional needs of people over 70 years of age, whether they support people living in residential care or in the community.
- Addresses Aged Care Royal Commission Recommendations specific to food and nutrition care- Recommendations 13, 19, 22 and 112.

BACKGROUND

Malnutrition in aged care in Australia is estimated to cost the government approximately \$9 billion per annum and to increase care costs by a factor of two to three.¹ Around 1.2 million older people living in the Australian community are either malnourished or at risk of malnutrition.² In 2010, Access Economics estimated that under-nutrition in 40,000 community dwelling people aged 70 years and above, cost the Australian health system \$158.2 million annually.³

The Morrison Government's \$2.5 million investment in the review of the Australian Dietary Guidelines was welcomed by the members of the Nutrition for Older Australians Alliance (NOAA) as an important step in promoting the health of all Australians. In addition to the Australian Dietary Guidelines, funding is needed to provide specific guidelines for older adults (aged 70+), who have

different nutrition needs to the rest of the population. These specific guidelines would be designed to recognise the diversity of people over 70 years and include advice for older adults who are physically active, those who have low appetite and those who are preventing unintentional weight loss.

Nutrition needs change as people enter different stages of life. Older people require more protein to maintain protective muscle mass, calcium, vitamin D and riboflavin (vitamin B2) to maintain bone strength and adequate energy (calories/kilojoules) to prevent unintentional weight loss when a person has a reduced appetite. On a social level, loneliness and lack of the social aspects of eating can reduce the amount of food an older adult eats, leading to poor health.^{4,5} Failure to meet these needs leads to the serious consequences of malnutrition and associated poor health, as demonstrated by the findings of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.⁶ Malnutrition also increases costs in both the Aged Care Sector and broader healthcare system.⁷

Whilst the 2017 NHMRC Nutrient Reference Values⁸ table recommends essential nutrient intake for adults over 70, the current Australian Dietary Guidelines do not account for the unique dietary needs of older adults, instead providing guidelines for the generally well adult population.⁹

The absence of specific dietary guidelines for older Australians (which draw on NRVs for adults aged 70 plus) reduces the capacity of the aged care sector, hospitals and other sectors to prepare nutritionally adequate home-delivered meals and residential aged care meals, snacks and beverages.¹

Consequently, industry guidelines such as the National Meal Guidelines: A Guide for Service Providers, Caterers and Health Professionals Providing Home Delivered and Centre Based Meal Programs for Older Australians are open to conjecture and other providers are reliant on varying interpretations, or nothing at all.

Funding to develop a specific set of Dietary Guidelines for older Australians, drawing on the revised Nutrient Reference Values for people 70 years plus would provide a basis to:

- a. Update the National Nutrition and Meal Guidelines for home delivered and centre-based meal programs for people over 70 years of age, with this new evidence.
- b. Develop evidence-based 'National Nutrition and Meal Guidelines', including governance and accountability frameworks, for residential aged care providers.
- c. Establish compliance obligations under the Aged Care Quality Standards as a minimum, for anyone providing food to older Australians.

Recommendation 2: Fund successful public education, implementation support, monitoring and evaluation of the Dietary Guidelines for older Australians, over 70 years.

COST

- \$2.5 million per year for public health campaigns, community support programs and systems level initiatives promoting healthy eating and other healthy behaviours for people over 70 years of age.
- To scope ongoing costs for monitoring and evaluation of the Australian Dietary Guidelines, including dietary guidelines for people over 70 years of age.

BENEFITS

- Increases older Australians' awareness of their dietary requirements, which may reduce health costs related to poor nutrition in people over 70 years of age living in the community
- Monitoring and evaluation of nutrition programs, initiatives and other actions supports cost effectiveness and efficacy of current and future programs.
- Better health outcomes for people over 70 years of age living in regional, rural and remote Australia^{10, 11}.
- Increased utilisation of early-intervention and preventive support to reduce future and ongoing health costs due to malnutrition in people over 70 years of age.

BACKGROUND

The Morrison Government's review of the Australian Dietary Guidelines is an important step in promoting the health of all Australians. Along with the valued review of the Guidelines, now underway, funding is needed to provide advice specific to older adults, who have different nutrition needs to the rest of the population, and to support the effective implementation and evaluation of the Guidelines.

There is a lack of education on food and nutrition for people over 70 years of age.¹ Older people are poorly informed about their changing nutrition requirements and those who are most at risk are unlikely to recognise their need for more nourishing meals.¹² There is little educational material available for consumers in the home, General Practitioners residential aged care facilities and other community health providers about nutrition needs of the older adults.¹

For rural and remote older Australians, this is compounded by the significant supply chain and logistical barriers to accessing the right food with appropriate nutritional value that ensures they are meeting their dietary requirements. It is important we raise awareness and educate the community on the importance of meeting dietary requirements and avoiding weight loss among older Australians.

With less than 4% of the population eating a diet consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines,^{9, 13} it is crucial that the time and effort put into dietary guidelines for older adults is translated into real action to support healthy diets.

A comprehensive implementation plan may include effective strategies such as mass media campaigns,¹⁴⁻¹⁶ community support programs and systems level actions.^{17, 18} A targeted campaign designed for older adults and their care providers would improve their understanding about age-appropriate nutritional requirements which supports targeted behaviour modification strategies. Components of the plan should include:

- a. Health professional education
- b. Education for aged care staff including cooks/chefs/food service staff in aged care facilities
- c. Promotion of nutrition as part of 70 years plus health checks (GP and primary healthcare-led)
- d. Public health campaign, across various mediums
- e. Monitoring of nutrition status among older people (clinical indicators, epidemiological monitoring via My Health Record) to assess the impact
- f. For older people living in regional, rural and remote Australia, utilising effective technology to engage and strengthen consumer voice.

Campaigns, programs, initiatives and other actions must be evaluated to indicate the returns of Government investments in terms of population health, community wellbeing and financial implications.¹⁹⁻²¹

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Further supporting resources

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National Meal Guidelines: A Guide for Service Providers, Caterers and Health Professionals Providing Home Delivered and Centre Based Meal Programs for Older Australians <https://mealsonwheels.org.au/learn-more/national-meals-guidelines/>