

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Encouraging Good Nutrition

Helping your care-receiver develop and maintain a healthy, well-balanced diet can be a considerable challenge, especially if you're an adult child taking care of an aging parent.

As a body ages, the digestive system is more prone to heartburn and constipation. Dental problems may make chewing painful. Some medications suppress a person's appetite or promote weight gain. Depression can bring on a change in appetite. Dad may simply not care about food. If Mom has memory loss, she may forget to eat or may think she *has* eaten. Finances may be tight. Some older people, after paying rent and utility bills, have little left over for buying food.

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It can also be difficult to eat properly when you're alone. It's so much easier to skip a meal or nibble on less nutritious foods when no one else is there.

And then, too, we each develop our eating habits over a lifetime. While we may know about the basic food groups or the food guide pyramid, that doesn't mean we always follow those guidelines. Changing lifelong habits is very difficult.

As the adult child of an aging parent, you can encourage your mother or father to eat well. This doesn't mean being pushy or disrespectful. It doesn't mean ignoring a parent's wishes. In fact, the more your care-receiver is involved in the process, the more likely it is to succeed.

--A first step may be to talk to your loved one's doctor and ask for the help of a nutritionist who can tell you what he or she specifically needs.

Your care-receiver may have to keep a daily journal of exactly what he or she eats. (The results can be surprising, but we would probably all be surprised if we kept track of what we ate each day.) A nutritionist will recommend an appropriate diet — low salt, low sugar, or low fat; high in fiber or calcium; and so forth. Encourage your loved one to

keep this diet. When the family gets together, make sure that foods on the diet are included in the menu. Don't serve your loved one food he or she isn't supposed to have.

--Check with the pharmacist to find out if any of your care-receiver's medications would react negatively to particular foods (like milk, for example).

--Be careful with vitamin pills. They aren't a catchall that makes up for poor eating habits. It's possible to take too many vitamins. And they're expensive.

--Keep in mind that some older people find it easier to eat six smaller meals throughout the day rather than three regular-size ones.

--Make food preparation as easy as possible for your care-receiver. Freeze small portions that can be heated in the microwave. Make sure the food looks appealing.

--Check out local community resources to see what kinds of meal delivery programs are available.

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Maybe your parent would like to go to a "nutrition site" at the local senior center and have a hot meal in the middle of the day. Help arrange transportation if needed.

--Remember that no one likes to eat the same foods day after day. Encourage your loved one to eat a variety of foods within the prescribed diet, and make sure your care-receiver gets the items he or she prefers.

--When grocery shopping, realize it's easy to fall into the trap of buying only ice cream or cookies or some other single food because "That's all she wants" or "That's all he'll eat." Like all of us, your loved one would prefer to live on a single, favorite treat; like all of us, he or she needs nutritious food for the best health possible.

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