

How can we better support older people at risk of malnutrition living in the community? A qualitative study

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Introduction: Malnutrition is associated with increased morbidity and mortality. However, we know little about the views of stakeholders on its current management in the community. Our aims were to a) explore the views and practices of older people at risk of malnutrition, their carers, primary care/community professionals on managing malnutrition, b) identify gaps in knowledge, facilitators and barriers to eating in later life, c) identify components of primary care-based interventions to support nutrition in frail older people.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews with community-dwelling people ≥ 75 yrs at risk of malnutrition, their carers; focus groups with carers, primary care/community health professionals (multi-disciplinary teams (MDT) and dietitians) in London and Hertfordshire, UK; Thematic analysis.

Results: We interviewed 93 participants (24 older people, 9 carers, 60 healthcare professionals). Most older people did not consider being low weight as a problem. 'Healthy eating' perceptions focused on fruit and vegetable intake and low-fat diet. Older people rarely asked their doctor about diet and none had received advice on protein or energy intake. Although carers were concerned about weight loss in the person they cared for, they were not provided with any nutritional guidance. Health professionals perceived malnutrition as a multi-faceted problem. However, there were conflicting views regarding professional accountability. Challenges commonly reported in primary care included overwhelming workload and lack of training in nutrition. MDTs and dietitians thought that interventions would be best placed in primary care. Education was an essential component, complemented by social/practical support for frailer or socially isolated older people.

Conclusions: Interventions for malnutrition should include a multi-faceted approach, with education tailored to the needs of older people, carers and healthcare professionals.