

Your brain on good nutrition

Proper diet can protect against dementia

(Lakes Region – August 1, 2010) – Good nutrition is beneficial at any age. Benefits worth noting are increased mental acuteness, resistance to illness/disease, higher energy levels, a more robust immune system, faster recuperation times and better management of chronic health problems. Now, however, proper nutrition for older adults is even more important, with research revealing that poor nutritional decisions can eventually lead to cognitive decline and dementia.

LIVE FREE HOME HEALTH CARE knows how challenging it can be for seniors to maintain a healthy diet, in part because of the difficulties with cooking for one or two persons, transportation difficulties, problems standing for long periods of time to cook, and even loneliness, which can take the joy out of mealtimes. Because caloric needs change with aging and less activity, another issue is the possibility that seniors are not receiving the proper low-fat, high nutrient foods their bodies require.

“With older adults, a healthy diet will emphasize nutrient-dense food choices and the importance of fluid balance,” said Jennifer Harvey, RN BSN, Clinical Director and owner of LIVE FREE HOME HEALTH CARE. “Appropriate fluid intake is often overlooked or goes unnoticed, because as we age, there can be a disassociation between how hydrated our bodies are and how thirsty we feel.”

Nutrient-dense foods are high in nutrients in relation to the calories they contain. For example, low-fat milk is more nutrient-dense than whole milk. Although the low-fat milk’s nutrient content is the same as the whole milk, the low-fat milk has fewer calories and would be the more appropriate choice for an older adult. Reducing the overall fat content in the diet, while still choosing nutrient-rich foods is the best way for the older adult to reach optimum nutrition and help protect against dementia and cognitive decline.

Specific research points to the antioxidant vitamins C and E as being particularly beneficial in protecting against Alzheimer’s disease. Vitamin E is primarily found in vegetable and nut oils, as well as in spinach and whole grain products. Vitamin C-rich foods include citrus fruits, such as oranges and grapefruits, as well as tomatoes, spinach and red peppers.

Keep in mind that nutrients are most beneficial when provided by actual foods rather than supplements; however, this sometimes proves difficult with an older adult because of decreased calorie needs. A health care professional should be consulted when considering vitamin supplements.

In addition to antioxidants, consuming a low-fat/low cholesterol diet can help to prevent the onset of Alzheimer’s disease. High fat diets are thought to impair learning and memory performance, and elevated blood cholesterol can triple a person’s risk for developing the disease. High cholesterol foods such as animal products (meat and dairy), butter and cooking oils and fried foods, should be minimized to no more than 300mg of cholesterol a day as recommended by the American Heart Association.

Preliminary studies have also shown a connection between omega-3 fatty acids and a reduced risk of Alzheimer’s disease. Omega-3 fatty acids, found most prevalently in fish, provide anti-inflammatory properties, which are thought to increase memory and learning performance. Fish high in omega-3 fatty acids include mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna, and salmon.

The true challenge may lie in encouraging a frail elder to eat when he or she suffers from poor appetite. Oftentimes, medications or treatable disorders such as heartburn, constipation or nausea can cause poor appetite. Meal times for a frail elder can also be lonely or depressing if a life partner has recently passed away. Some tips to encourage a person at mealtimes include:

- Ask the reason why the person does not want to eat (not hungry, the food is cold, food doesn’t taste good, etc.)
- Serve small, frequent meals rather than three larger meals
- Serve beverages after a meal so a person doesn’t feel full before eating the meal
- Bring the joy back to mealtimes with colorful foods and a variety of textures
- Set an attractive table with food garnishes, placemats, flowers and perhaps music in the background
- Consider finger foods that are easy to handle or use adaptive equipment such as silverware with specially designed handles for those who have difficulty using utensils

Ensuring that a loved one is eating enough nutritious foods and drinking enough fluids is a challenge, but it is important to remember to treat the person as an adult, not a child. Also consider hiring a home care agency for assistance with trips to the grocery store, planning and preparation of meals, and companionship during mealtimes. For more information about

the nutritional needs of the elderly in our local community or an easy nutritional screening form, please contact LIVE FREE HOME HEALTH CARE.

####

About Live Free Home Health Care

Serving the Lakes Region and Central New Hampshire, Live Free Home Health Care, LLC is dedicated to providing top quality care in the comfort of home, wherever home may be. Family owned and operated, Live Free Home Health Care offers a wide range of services, from companion care and assistance with activities of daily living to skilled nursing. All care is supervised and updated by a registered nurse, who is specially trained to watch for new or changing health issues. Whether the need is for short or long term care, Live Free Home Health Care works with each client's physician to provide a continuum of care unparalleled with other agencies, and the compassionate staff promises to treat each client respectfully and like a cherished family member. Live Free Home Health Care also offers medical alert systems to provide extra peace of mind should an emergency care need arise.

For further information, contact **(603) 217-0149** or visit www.LiveFreeHomeHealthCare.com.