

Food and Nutrition

Representing more than simple nourishment, food can be a powerful social symbol connecting people with moods, emotions and rituals associated with their identity, family and traditions. A person's relationship with food is highly intimate and individualised. Built over a life time, food habits can evoke feelings of comfort and familiarity and can be profoundly intrinsic to a sense of 'self'.

In considering the food and nutritional needs of consumers it is important to keep in mind that although food can be strongly associated with cultural expression and religious observance, the customs of people from similar cultural and/or religious backgrounds may vary considerably. Whilst some people may continue with the certain dietary styles such as vegan, kosher and halal, others may have adopted different preferences based on their experiences.

It is also important to recognise that individuals may not be accustomed to eating certain diets and may therefore experience different levels of tolerance for some foods. For example, a person who is used to eating rice as a staple part of every meal may not deal well with a diet high in wheat based products. The same can be said for diets high in dairy products.

Similarly the way food is served and utensils used can vary greatly. Some consumers may be accustomed to eating out of a bowl instead of a plate, or to using chopsticks or spoons instead of forks and knives. Some may even prefer or be accustomed to using their hands for eating.

Understanding and respecting consumers' individual and cultural nuances around food will ensure that they are able to maintain significant practices, a meaningful connection to the past, a healthy and joyful relationship to food, improving their prospects for maintaining nutritional sustenance.

Key Considerations

- Conduct assessments and reviews of dietary needs in consumer's preferred language
- Consult a dietician or nutritionist for assistance in modifying the menu to incorporate culturally/religiously appropriate and nutritionally sound meals.
- Involve consumers in menu planning and food preparation (where appropriate).
- Ensure that staff responsible for food preparation are familiar with dietary preferences and culturally determined dietary restrictions of the consumer, and provide training as required.
- Ensure that staff responsible for assessment of dietary requirements have been trained in cultural awareness and appropriate communication.
- Be aware of any special rules/requirements/restrictions there are preparation methods for certain foods such as Halal or Kosher.
- Present menu choices in the preferred language of consumer.
- Offer meals served in a bowl instead of on a plate or different eating utensils such as chopsticks or a spoon instead of a knife and fork.
- Offer a bowl of water and a towel with meals for people who prefer to eat with their hands.

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- Provide a range of traditional condiments at meal times e.g. salt, pepper, tomato sauce, soy sauce, fish sauce, chilli, Tabasco sauce, olive oil, vinegar and salad dressings.
- Regularly include consumers' favourite meals in menu plans - ask consumers and/or family members for recipes and instructions on the correct way of preparing these dishes.
- Identify and celebrate special occasions with a culturally/religiously appropriate dish, and invite families, friends and community members.
- Obtain specific items and meals from external sources, where necessary.
- Plan regular outings to local restaurants for a meal or arrange for food to be delivered for residents on special occasions.
- Where possible invite consumers to cook a meal for themselves, with assistance relatives or volunteers from local cultural groups if required.

Useful Resources

Best Practice Food and Nutrition Manual for Aged Care Edition 2.1

NSW Government

This comprehensive manual includes a chapter on Religious, Spiritual, Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds of Residents

SBS Food and Recipes

SBS Food

Recipes from over 30 different countries. Search recipes by cuisine: African, Asian-Pacific, Americas, European and Middle-Eastern.

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