

New research reveals high rates of malnutrition in people living with dementia in long-term care

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Professor Karen Walton and Associate Professor Kelly Lambert. Credit: University of Wollongong

University of Wollongong (UOW) researchers have found one-in-four

people living with dementia in long-term care facilities suffer from malnutrition.

It is the first [systematic review](#) of [malnutrition](#) rates among those with [dementia](#) living in [long-term care](#) worldwide. The researchers also found 50% of people living with dementia in long-term care facilities are at risk of becoming malnourished. The study is published in the journal *Nutrients*.

Dietitian Associate Professor Kelly Lambert from the School of Medical, Indigenous and Health Sciences said the numbers are alarming, but not surprising.

"Dementia alters eating behaviors, hunger and thirst cues, swallow function, ability to self-feed, and recognition and interest in food," Lambert said. "Food intake can be significantly altered due to the complex nature of dementia, so it's not surprising to see high rates of malnutrition."

Researchers from UOW reviewed studies of malnutrition rates in long-term care facilities across Europe and South Asia, however Australia is not included due to a lack of data.

"Our study highlights the need for more investment and research into malnutrition in long-term care facilities in Australia," Lambert said. "We know these issues are not exclusive to long-term care facilities overseas and malnutrition is affecting people with dementia in long-term care facilities on our very doorstep."

Lambert has previously worked in hospitals and for 25 years as a dietitian and has seen first-hand the impact poor nutrition has on people living with dementia. "Dementia steals food from your loved one slowly and insidiously. It can be heartbreaking for families caring for loved

ones with dementia to watch them lose the ability to eat and not enjoy the pleasure food can bring to a person's life.

"This new research enables us to really quantify how much of a problem there may be with malnutrition in people with dementia living in aged-care facilities in Australia. We need to strengthen the type of nutrition support these residents are receiving as well as the nutritional quality of meals provided."

In May the [federal government](#) committed \$12.9 million towards better nutrition in aged care. Lambert said the announcement should be applauded given the severe impact that dementia can have on eating, nutrition and health. "Dementia is rapidly increasing in prevalence and is expected to double by 2050. The current working population needs to think carefully about how we support and fund care for the increasing number of people with dementia going forward."

UOW Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Research and Sustainable Futures) Professor David Currow said this research highlights the challenges our aging population faces.

"Associate Professor Kelly Lambert and her colleagues have undertaken important research that reveals the real issues people living with dementia and their families face every day," Currow said. "I congratulate the researchers on their commitment and dedication to improving the lives of those living with dementia in [long-term care facilities](#) and the wider community.

"This research is not only important but also highlights the University's commitment to creating happy and healthy communities for people of all ages."

More information: Emma Perry et al, Prevalence of Malnutrition in

People with Dementia in Long-Term Care: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis, *Nutrients* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/nu15132927](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu15132927)

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