Medical Xpress

Undernutrition a major problem for people with dementia

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Credit: Alzheimer's Disease International

(Medical Xpress)—A new report, released today, highlights that undernutrition is a major problem among people with dementia, and stresses the importance of recognising nutrition as a potential key factor in the wellbeing of people with dementia.

Research reviewed in the report finds that 20-45% of those with dementia in the community experience clinically significant weight loss over one year.

A team of researchers, led by Professor Martin Prince from the King's College London Global Observatory for Ageing and Dementia Care, produced the report 'Nutrition and dementia: a review of available research', which was commissioned by Alzheimer's Disease International (ADI) and Compass Group.

The report reviews existing research on dietary factors across the life course that might increase or decrease the risk of developing dementia in later life. While obesity in mid-life may be a risk factor for developing dementia in late life, weight loss tends to become a more significant issue in the decade leading up to the clinical onset of the disease and accelerates thereafter.

The report also details actions that could improve the nutrition of people with dementia through diet and external factors such as modifying the mealtime environment, and supporting and training carers. Given the evidence for effective interventions, there is much untapped potential to improve the food intake and nutritional status of people with dementia.

Professor Prince, from King's College London, says: "For older people, undernutrition is arguably a greater health concern than obesity, and it is particularly common among people with dementia. This is a neglected area of research with important implications for quality of life, health and functioning. While weight loss in dementia is very common and can be an intrinsic part of the disease, it could be avoided and we should be doing more to tackle the problem."

Marc Wortmann, Executive Director, ADI, says: "I am very pleased that ADI and Compass Group commissioned this report. We believe that a focus on diet, nutrition and wellbeing is a positive approach to supporting people with dementia and carers of this devastating disease. The report also shows we need more research into the potential role of nutrition in reducing the risk of developing dementia."

Mike Iddon, Group Healthcare Director of Compass Group, says: "We recognise the importance of reports such as this, which further our understanding of the potential links between nutrition and dementia. By working closely with our healthcare and care home clients, we believe we can make a positive contribution to improving the care of people

affected by dementia."

The Report recommends that:

- The adoption of nutritional standards of care for people with dementia should be considered throughout the health and social care sectors. These could include regular monitoring of weight, as well as assessments of diet and feeding behaviours, and the need for feeding assistance.
- Family and professional carers should be trained and supported to understand and meet the challenges involved in maintaining adequate nutrition for people with dementia.
- Evidence-based advice should be provided to inform consumer choices regarding the balance of risks and benefits associated with the use of nutritional supplements claimed to protect cognition in late life, before or after the onset of dementia.
- More research should be conducted into the effective components of a diet that might prevent dementia and the progression of mild cognitive impairment.

More information: The report is available here: www.alz.co.uk/nutrition-report

Provided by King's College London

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