

Unintentional Weight Loss in the Elderly

By Jean Jeffers, Staff Writer

"You've lost weight again this month," said the doctor to this 81 year old patient.

Sudden unintentional weight loss is sometimes a cause for concern. Dr. Grace Brooke Huffman is the Associate Medical Director of D.C.'s Montgomery Hospice. In her article, "Evaluating and Treating Unintentional Weight Loss in the Elderly," she warns that a senior who loses weight suddenly is at greater risk of developing other conditions. Loss of appetite, less of a sense of taste and smell may contribute. Decreased mobility, depression, and financial difficulties, all common in old age, may be a cause of sudden weight loss.

One reason this weight loss is of concern is that muscle wasting happens quickly, leaving the person in a weakened, debilitated state of health. Sometimes weight loss may come from certain health conditions themselves, such as cancer, hyperthyroidism and Alzheimer's disease. Certain medications do the same.

The consequences of losing a significant amount of weight include an increase in mortality rate. Dr. Huffman says, "There is a strong connection between the quality of life and quick unintentional weight loss. Underweight individuals are at even greater risk of death due to weight loss."

When a family member is aged and lives alone, it is good for a relative to take an interest and make observations regarding how that senior is doing. Some measures to employ with an elderly relative include:

1. Monitor weight on a regular basis. One thing that can be done is to take a photo periodically and compare, you can actually see any weight changes.
2. Look in the senior's refrigerator and see what they have on hand. Do they have fresh food or is the food past the edible range?
3. Go to the grocery store with them and see what their buying habits are, what foods interest them, do they eat healthy?
4. Ask the person directly if they are



- losing weight or if you may weigh them and do so periodically.
5. See that the senior has a physical yearly and goes in for periodic visits to his/her doctor. This could forestall any surprises.
6. Identify the problem. If it is because of fatigue, or less of a desire to cook, a food service could provide meals.
7. Check for dental problems; the person may experience pain on eating. Or have missing teeth that do not allow for sufficient chewing

of food. Offer milk shakes daily or get in a supply of nutritious fortified drinks.

And the question becomes, how may I prompt my parent or family member to eat? Something as simple as increasing the nutrient density of foods rather than the quantity is advisable. Set a regular eating schedule and offer to eat a meal occasionally with the person, they may simply be lonely. This encourages social time with meals. Encouraging having a snack at odd hours may be helpful.

Be aware of medical side effects of health conditions and side effects of drugs, and consider using an appetite stimulant. Ruling out underlying problems and making sure the person is getting sufficient nutrients is important. Keep in mind that not all weight loss is problematic; the person could lose a few pounds and remain healthy. See a doctor for questions regarding determination of the severity of the situation.

About the Author

Jean is an RN and holds an MSN in nursing. She is a writer doing freelance and is a staff writer for two sister publications, *Living Well 50Plus* and *Health & Wellness Magazines*. She is previously published in *Diabetes Health* and *Infinity Magazines*. Jean is currently seen in *Today's Christian in the Mature Years*.



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