It is important that older patients get the help and encouragement they need to eat and drink in hospital because good nutrition will help them recover from illness quicker.

Whether you are a member of the hospital staff, a relative, friend, carer or volunteer, there’s a lot you can do to make mealtimes more pleasant and comfortable for an older patient.

Some patients will be able to eat on their own with a little assistance, while others will need you to physically help them, if they can’t manage by themselves. If they are feeling poorly, they won’t want to eat much or anything at all, so they would really benefit from the extra support and encouragement that you can give.

By sitting down with an older patient at mealtimes, you will also be able to identify and report any difficulties they have with eating or drinking and be on hand to assess whether the food they are being served is suitable for their needs, well presented and appetising.

Helpful Contacts:

**Your local Age Concern:**

Age Concern’s *Hungry to be Heard* campaign aimed at reducing the risk of malnutrition for older people in hospital.

*Email:* htbh@ace.org.uk
*Website:* www.ageconcern.org.uk/htbh

Royal College of Nursing’s *Nutrition Now* campaign aimed at raising standards of nutrition and hydration in hospitals and the community.

*Email:* rcncampaigns@rcn.org.uk
*Website:* www.rcn.org.uk

Age Concern England
Astral House, 1268 London Road
London SW16 4ER
Registered Charity no 261794

October 2007
Tips for helping an older person to eat in hospital

1 **Prepare for mealtimes**
   An older patient is more likely to feel like eating if they are clean, comfortable and relaxed before each meal arrives. You can help (or arrange for help) with:
   - Going to the toilet and hand-washing
   - Brushing teeth, freshening the mouth and fitting dentures
   - Putting hearing aids in and spectacles back on
   - Sitting upright in bed or a chair
   - Clearing the tray and bedside tables of any clutter to minimise distractions
   - Making sure there are no unpleasant sights, smells or sounds that could put them off their food.

2 **Set up food trays**
   It’s important to support older people to eat by themselves, and to allow plenty of time for this. You can help by making sure food is within reach and is easy to handle by:
   - Adjusting tray tables to the right height
   - Removing wrappers and lids
   - Cutting up food into manageable pieces
   - Buttering bread and peeling fruit
   - Putting straws in drinks
   - Arranging special cutlery (like non-slip mats and two-handled cups) if better grip is needed.

While you’re setting up food trays, it’s a good time to let older patients know what’s on the menu, and identify different foods on their plate (especially if it’s pureed or minced). Ask if that’s what they ordered to ensure it’s the right meal.

3 **Help with eating**
   Some patients will need your assistance to eat and drink. You should:
   - Sit in front of them and make eye contact
   - Give small amounts at a time and pause between each mouthful: don’t have a loaded spoon waiting, as this can look as if you’re saying “hurry up”
   - Offer a drink at regular intervals
   - Mix food with gravy or sauces (if their diet allows) to make it easier for them to chew and swallow
   - Allow plenty of time. It can take about 20-30 minutes to help each patient to eat comfortably.

4 **Offer encouragement**
   When an older patient is feeling poorly, they are likely to refuse food. It’s important that they try and eat something – even if it’s just a little. You can help by:
   - Being pleasant and friendly. A genuine smile and polite conversation could be all it takes to encourage them to eat
   - Speaking positively about the food (eg “It smells really good”)
   - Serving less food more often (as too much at once can be overwhelming)
   - Encouraging snacks between meals that are nutrient-rich like puddings, full cream yoghurts and biscuits with cheese.

5 **Chat and observe**
   Through conversation, observation, or both, you can also spot any problems that an older patient has with eating and drinking (such as chewing or swallowing difficulties) or with the food itself (in terms of suitability, temperature, taste, quality, presentation and/or timing).

Any concerns should be directed to the nursing team. They are professionals who will be able to help.