

Editorial

Improving Nutritional Status to Promote the Health Status of Chinese Elderly

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Nutrition is critical for human health. Good nutritional status is fundamental for maintaining body functions and a good quality of life of the older adults. Therefore, it is important that researchers of geriatrics pay more attention to the nutritional status of the elderly and investigate practical interventions that can improve the situation.

The major malnutrition problems in the elderly

The problem of malnutrition in the elderly is a result of many factors, including improper dietary habits, imbalanced nutrition, diseases, aging, polypharmacotherapy, cognitive disorders, culture and economic conditions. In Mainland China, both over-nutrition and under-nutrition co-exist with a prevalence rate of 43.2% for overweight and obesity [1] (including 19.6% for diabetes [1]) and 6.2% of under-nutrition [1]. Insufficient and unbalanced food intakes are very common in older people. Invisible hunger, which is characterized by insufficient levels of trace elements in older people, should not be neglected. For example, only 36% of oldsters reach the daily recommended intake of calcium, and 50% of elderly people do not receive adequate intakes of vitamin A [1]. In addition, deficiencies of vitamin D and zinc are common among the older segments of the population [1].

The consequences of malnutrition

Malnutrition in the elderly accelerates the process of aging, the occurrence of chronic diseases and the decline of physical function. Old people with co-morbidity are more likely to have malnutrition, which results in higher rates of complications, readmission, nosocomial infection and death, as well as longer stays in hospitals and lower quality of life than in the general older population [2]. Consequently, costs for additional medical treatment increase significantly. A multi-center survey conducted in China showed that the medical expenditures for hospitalized older patients with nutritional problems were 5000 yuan (RMB) greater than those associated with compared groups. It is estimated that in 2012 in China 10% of the treatment cost for the elderly was spent on malnutrition problems, which accounted for 8% of the total national health expenditures [1].

Studies needed on nutrition to improve health status of the elderly

The relationship between nutrition and successful aging in China

has been emphasized since 2006. After several years of studies and discussions, the theoretical basis and practical guidance for this problem are gradually being established. For example, Balance Diet pagoda for Chinese elderly was released by the Geriatric Nutrition Branch of the Chinese Nutrition Society in 2010, which recommends the dietary structure, including amounts of food intake and combinations of various foods for the elderly [3]. In 2013, the revised version of the publication was issued that identified suitable caloric intakes, along with recommended nutrients for older Chinese people [4].

Recently, there have been more and more calls for additional study of the relationship between nutrition and the health of the elderly. Studies to date have confirmed that nutritional intervention can have vital effects on improving health status of old people, especially for those with geriatric syndromes such as osteoporosis [5], sarcopenia [6] and frailty. Supplements of trace elements have also been found to contribute to improved cognitive function in the elderly.

Given the aging of the Chinese population, coupled with the potential benefits of nutritional intervention, routine screening and assessment of nutrition status of patients should be emphasized. Furthermore, effective, population-specific intervention strategies and products for addressing different nutritional conditions should be developed.

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