

From the MAG LTC Ombudsman--- Enhancing the Dining Experience: More Than Just Regulations and Nutrition

Food according to Regulations

- Facilities must provide 3 meals/day, 7 days/week, plus snacks.
- Facilities must offer suitable alternative meals and snacks.
- Menus must be planned in advance, dietitian approved, & posted. Menus must be followed and substitutions documented.
- Food must be high-quality, prepared to preserve nutrition, flavor, & appearance, & served at proper temperature.
- Therapeutic diets require physician or dietitian involvement.

Other Non-Negotiables

- Clean environment including tables, silverware, glasses and floor.
- Appropriate portion sizes including large portions, seconds and additional options for larger appetites.
- Ensure meat and vegetables are not too tough to chew, especially with dental challenges.

While nutrition and regulatory compliance are essential, food also provides comfort, joy, and normalcy. Meals are social, pleasurable experiences, vital to routine. Focusing on the “Experience of Food” can enhance quality of life and decrease food complaints. Here are some best practices:

Food affirms memories and the value of an individual

- Prepare a dish using a resident's recipe.
- Birthday traditions like serving special food or dessert, eating with staff, or using a special plate.

Expectations and Consistency

- Use common names on menu or brief descriptions.
- Consistency in following the menu builds trust; notify residents of changes ASAP.

Introduce Variety, Novelty and Surprises

- Special meals for holidays create a festive atmosphere and contribute to a sense of community and celebration.
- Seasonal decorations can add excitement.
- For monthly resident choice meal, also change the environment (ie tablecloths, background music, server's attire).
- Rearrange layout in dining room.
- Serve breakfast for dinner.
- Surprise residents with a donut run, pizza out of the box, unusual fruit or vegetable from the farmer's market.

Empower residents with choices, even simple ones

- Residents propose and vote on a “Meal of the Month.”
- Have 2 textures of vegetables available-- crisp tender and extra soft.
- Instead of having many drink options, have 2-3 always available and allow residents to vote monthly on an additional drink option.
- Allow residents to vote on alternate menu options.
- Every month, rotate 1-2 snack options with resident input.
- Provide spices and condiments at the table so residents can season their own food.

Do Food With, not For Residents

Try to shift the mindset from providing meals *for* residents to actively engage them *with* the food experience. This means fostering an environment where residents are not passive recipients but active participants in the culinary journey. Some suggestions include:

- Invite the dietitian for a Q&A.
- Hold a food committee meeting or invite the dietary manager to the resident council.
 - Creates relationship between staff and residents.
 - Residents have opportunity for direct feedback.
 - Dietary staff has opportunity to share their constraints.
 - Ask for resident help and input whenever possible (snack options, provide centerpieces).
 - Ask for specific positive feedback to balance “complaints.”
- Take residents on a tour of the kitchen.
- Have dietary manager/staff ask for feedback during a meal--good and bad.
- Invite staff to eat with residents.
 - Management staff, employee of the month, corporate staff, specific departments, staff birthdays.

Food ideas for residents

Food is an important part of life. That does not change when you live in assisted living or skilled nursing facilities. Now, you have less control over what, how and when you eat.

Dietary staff have a range of talent, experience and ability when planning, preparing and serving food. Some dietary staff are open to feedback; others are defensive when they hear criticism. Menus are based on national dietary guidelines, which may be different from your specific dietary needs or preferences. You can still choose what to eat.

You can improve the dining experience at your facility. Here are some ideas:

- Find something positive about the meal and speak up, write a note, or talk about it with other residents
- Attend resident council meetings; request the dietary manager attend or ask for a special food committee
- Offer specific suggestions to improve (ie, vegetables are served cold but meat is hot)
- Request a “resident choice meal of the month” or ways to share your recipes
- Follow time-lines about requesting alternates

Meal time is more than food--it is also the environment and a social time. Here are ideas for residents to help:

- Prepare a joke, idea or question for a meal, especially if the topic of conversation is always complaints about the food
- Suggest ideas, lend decorations, ask for background music or other changes for special occasions

What if there are problems?

- Accept that not every meal, every day will be perfect
- Remain polite, especially with staff who are delivering meals
- Request an individual conversation with the dietary manager or dietician
- Be specific about your concerns
- Focus on issues in the past 2-4 weeks
- Purchase specific food items that you enjoy

When to involve the Ombudsman 801-229-3809 or contact licensing authorities 800-662-4157:

- Physician ordered diets that were agreed upon before admission are not being followed, including texture of food
- More than half of the meals in a 2 week period are:
 - More than 30 minutes late
 - Hot food not hot, cold food not cold
 - Quality not good enough to eat
 - Servings not large enough to satisfy hunger
 - Meals do not match the menu AND substitutions are not equal in nutritional value
 - No snacks available
 - Document, such as writing on the menu or taking pictures
- Speaking to dietary staff, management about specific concerns has not been effective