

If your elderly loved one is refusing to eat, seek medical advice

How to make seniors interested in eating

BY JACQUILINE NAKANDI

Josephine Nakalanda is sickly and on treatment. Her caretakers complain that she rejects foods yet she needs to take a lot of tablets daily.

Nakalanda is undergoing treatment for diabetes and high blood pressure; and that may be the reason why her appetite plummeted and she is now selective in food.

She has started losing weight and her health condition is worrying. Doctors recently said she is suffering from malnutrition. This is when the body is not receiving enough nutrients.

Doctors advise that as people age, it is important that they feed well to avoid illnesses that come with inadequate nutrition. However, sometimes senior citizens may have diseases or be on treatment which costs them their appetite.

Most often, a gradual decrease in appetite is considered a normal part of the aging process. The elderly have lower energy levels and often partake in less physical activity, which means they generally need less calories than a younger person. However, if your elderly loved one is refusing to eat and you notice extreme weight loss, do not take it lightly. It is a cause for concern.

According to research published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, a 10% loss of overall body weight is linked to a higher risk of death just six months after the initial weight loss.

LOSS OF APPETITE

According to experts, appetite is controlled by several factors in the body. It is a complex interplay of hormones, signals from the stomach and brain, which also involves the sense of taste, smell and sight.

A healthy appetite is where a person desires food but is satisfied once enough food is consumed to maintain the blood sugar levels and provide energy for a period of time thereafter.

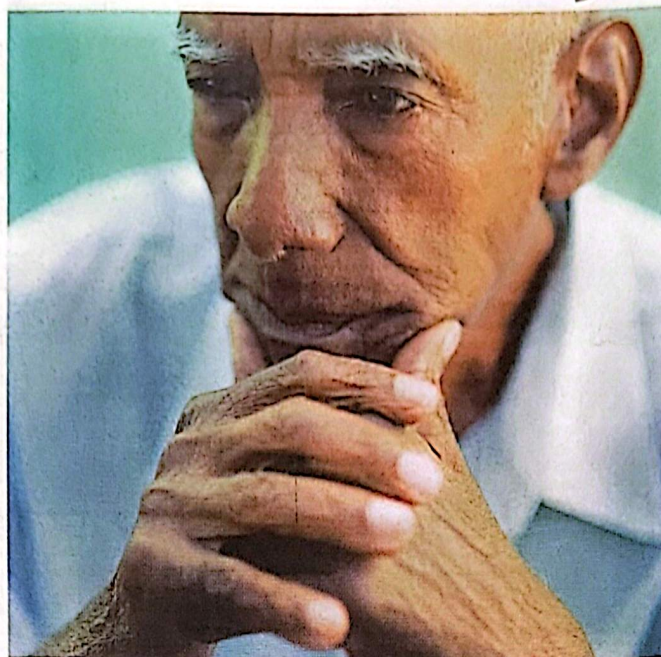
A common problem among the elderly is loss of appetite (anorexia). It is usually a gradual decline in appetite and the development of poor eating habits. But in some instances, it can be sudden.

It is emotionally taxing for a caregiver when a loved one just will not eat.

Dr Augustine Kintu, a family doctor in Kitintale, says loss of appetite is often an early warning sign of something gone wrong. And sometimes the causes are known (and can be handled) like medication side-effects problems with teeth or even loneliness.

"For the elderly, changes in the senses cause food to taste differently and this can reduce their appetite. However, when you cannot tell the cause of appetite loss or you are unable to control it, there is need to investigate it. Sometimes it is a sign of a more serious illness," he says.

"When seniors show no desire to eat, say they never feel hungry or are experiencing unintentional weight loss, there may be an underlying medical reason."



Lack of appetite causes weight loss which weakens the elderly due to advanced age

WHAT TO EAT

According to Dr Augustine Kintu, a family doctor, when you are about 70 or 80, there is no such thing as bad food when losing weight.

"But while calories are important, nutritious foods are important for health, stamina, the immune system and repair of thin, less-resilient skin that breaks down easily, he says.

Kintu recommends fortified, ready-to-eat cereals and powdered instant breakfast drinks mixed with milk. Liquid supplements are nutritionally comparable but often leave an unpleasant medicinal taste in the mouth. Because many older adults are deficient in calcium and Vitamin D, he recommends adding a tablespoon or two of non-fat dry milk powder to yoghurt, cheese, creamed soup, hot cereals and even a glass of milk. It adds protein and makes food creamier and easier to swallow. The trick is to blend it well to prevent graininess.

Kintu also suggests baked or microwaved potatoes and colourful treats such as watermelon, mandarins, apples, oranges, strawberries and mangoes. The brighter the colour, the better.



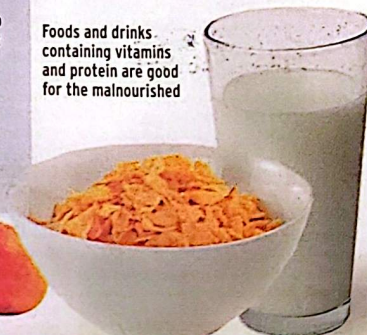
Kintu says the medical reasons that could be causing appetite loss in the elderly include thyroid disorders, dementia or alzheimer's disease.

Others are hepatitis or chronic liver disease, kidney failure, ovarian cancer, pancreatic, lung and stomach cancers or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

He advises that you contact a doctor if the elderly is not eating and is losing weight without trying. "All these conditions can be halted if identified in time," he said.

Denis Katanku, a nutritionist and dietician at Uganda Heart Institute, Mulago, says some elderly lack knowledge of what to eat and what not to. He explains that women in post-menopause should consume foods rich in calcium because their oestrogen and bone density levels tend to decrease.

Foods and drinks containing vitamins and protein are good for the malnourished

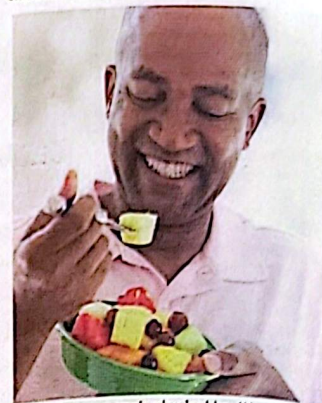


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INCREASING APPETITE

1 EAT TOGETHER

Dr Augustine Kintu, a family doctor, advises caretakers to eat with the elderly. "Enjoy a meal together or encourage your loved one to join others for a weekly lunch or dinner. Studies show that seniors who eat with others tend to eat more and make healthier food choices," he says.



Fruits improve one's physical health

2 NUTRITIOUS FOODS

Secondly, an elderly person's tastes may be changing, so try making nutritious meals that are bright, colourful and packed with vitamins and minerals.

"Our tendency to overwhelm loved ones with a heap of food on their plate usually deters them from eating altogether," Kintu says.

He also advises that setting a schedule for meals makes it a routine part of your loved one's day. Try serving food at the same time throughout the day, every day of the week, he says.

3 EXERCISE

Kintu also recommends a brisk walk for about an hour before meal time to stimulate one's appetite.



Working out increases one's appetite

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