



UNDERSTANDING THE NUTRITION GAP  
AND HOW IT AFFECTS THE PERSON  
YOU CARE FOR



# WHAT IS A NUTRITION GAP?

Keeping your body as strong as it can be is important for your overall health. Food, and the nutrients it provides, are essential in helping the body maintain or improve strength, stay mobile and keep up independence.

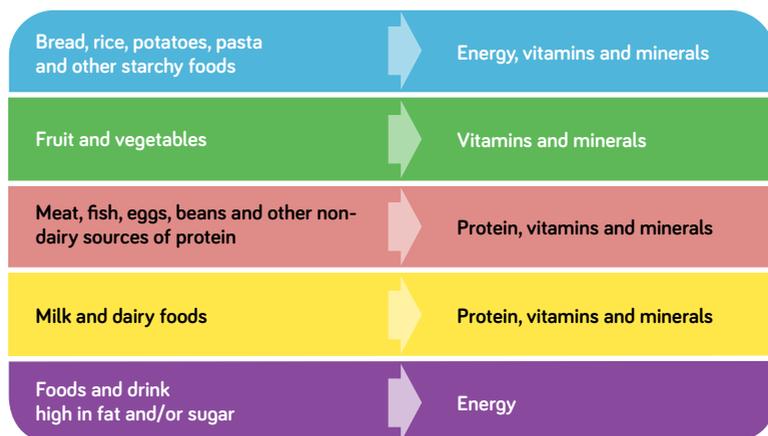
During times of illness, or when recovering from an operation or recent infection, the body can become weaker. This may be through the effects of the disease or illness itself, or as a result of its treatment. In addition, the natural ageing process can lead to loss of strength and weakness.

During these times, many people can find it difficult to eat enough food, which can result in unexpected weight loss. If the body is not provided with enough food over a period of time it could suffer from a nutrition gap, also known as 'undernutrition.' Healthcare professionals may also refer to this as malnutrition.

This unexpected weight loss and poor dietary intake can further decrease energy levels, reduce physical strength and can weaken the immune system.

# NUTRITIONAL NEEDS FOR HEALTHY ADULTS

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health for us all. This includes eating foods from all the different food groups, to provide us with the nutrients we need.



Sometimes the person you care for can struggle to eat the right amounts of certain food groups. The eatwell guide shows the portions of the different food groups we need to eat each day to have a balanced and healthy diet. Based on the eatwell guide you should try to eat:

## Plenty of starchy food

- Bread, breakfast cereals, potatoes and pasta are a good source of energy.
- Always choose wholegrain varieties where you can.

## **Plenty of fruit and vegetables**

- Aim for five portions a day to provide you with a good source of vitamins and minerals. 1 portion is equivalent to: 1 apple, 1 medium banana, 1 handful of grapes, 150ml glass of unsweetened orange juice, dessert bowl of salad.

## **Some protein**

- Meat, fish, eggs, beans.

## **Some milk and dairy foods**

- Including cheese and yogurt; choose low-fat options if trying to reduce fat in your diet.

## **Limit the amount of foods high in fat or sugar**

- Crisps, chocolate, sweets.

The amount that you need to eat of the different food groups will vary depending on how active you are and if you are trying to lose or gain weight.

For more information on the eatwell guide, visit  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide>

For more information about eating well when you are caring for someone visit the Carers UK website [carersuk.org/nutrition](http://carersuk.org/nutrition)

# WHY ARE ENERGY AND PROTEIN IMPORTANT?

Energy and protein are important for the body for a number of reasons. Energy provides the fuel we need to go about our lives, and protein helps us to stay strong and repair the body after illness or injury.

Everyone will have different energy and protein needs depending on a number of factors, including age, weight, activity levels, or becoming unwell. The daily estimated average nutritional requirements for healthy adults are shown in the table below\*.

	Weight	Energy	Protein
Man	74kg or 11st	2550kcal	56g
Woman	60kg or 9st 6lb	1940kcal	45g

\*All the information in the table is based on UK RNI for males and females 19-49.

# WHY DO OUR NUTRITIONAL NEEDS CHANGE?

At different stages in our lives our nutritional needs can change. Our needs can also change when we are living with a medical condition or recovering from an illness or operation, and during these times we often require more nutrition. It is also very common to take in less food during these times, or simply as a result of getting older. This might be because of a reduced appetite or a lack of energy to shop, prepare, or even cook food. Some of the other reasons for being unable to eat include:

- Taste changes due to medical treatment, certain medications or illness.
- Problems with teeth or dentures.
- Feeling lonely, anxious or depressed.
- Feeling sick, feeling full very quickly or having altered bowel habits.
- Being in pain.
- Simply feeling under the weather.

# HIGHLIGHTING THE IMPACT OF A NUTRITION GAP

## TO ILLUSTRATE HOW THIS NUTRITION GAP MAY DEVELOP, WE CAN LOOK AT THE EXAMPLE OF ELSA.

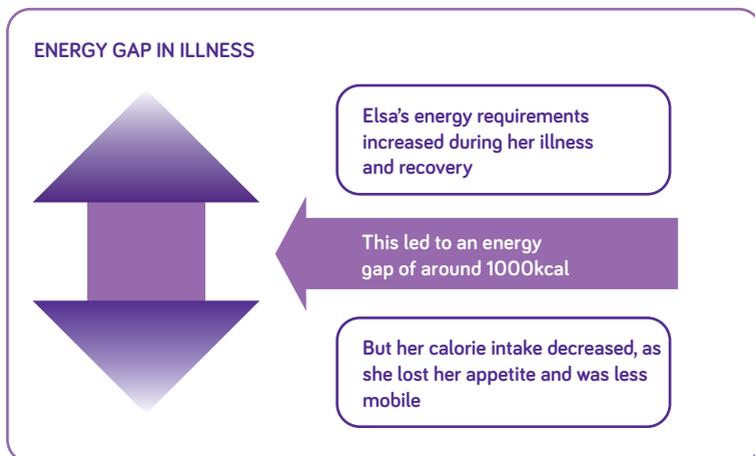
Elsa is 74 years old and she has been cared for by her daughter for the last 5 years. She recently had a fall and broke her leg, meaning she cannot get about like she used to, and sits in her chair all day until she goes to bed. Elsa's daughter noticed a decrease in her appetite after her leg was in plaster for several weeks. She was so worried about her food intake that one day she decided to keep a record of what her mother ate

<b>Breakfast</b>	2 tablespoons of cornflakes, ¼ pint of semi skimmed milk, 1 teaspoon sugar, ½ a cup of tea with ½ teaspoon sugar and a dash of milk
<b>Snack</b>	1 plain biscuit, ½ a cup of tea with ½ teaspoon sugar and a dash of milk
<b>Lunch</b>	½ can tomato soup, ½ slice of white bread, 1 plain biscuit
<b>Snack</b>	Small banana, 1 cup of tea with ½ teaspoon sugar and a dash of milk
<b>Dinner</b>	1 slice white bread, thin scraping of spreading cheese, ½ can of custard

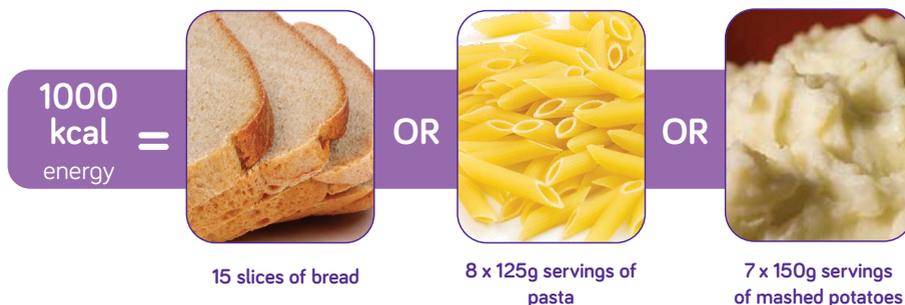
Both Elsa and her daughter were concerned that she might not be getting the right amount of nutrition needed to help her broken leg to repair and to get her back to her old self again.

# ELSA'S ENERGY GAP

If we look at Elsa's example, she was eating roughly half of what she needed. The difference between the energy her body needed and what she actually received was around 1000kcal in energy.



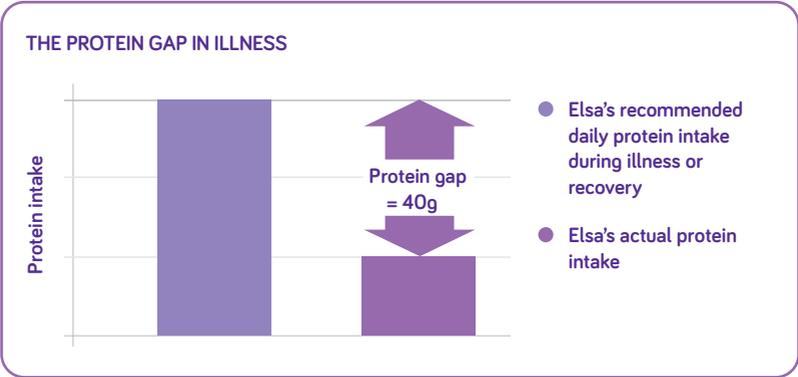
To fill an energy gap as described in this case, Elsa would need to eat the amount of energy included in one of the following portions of food, in addition to her current intake:



This example is for illustrative purposes only and we would always recommend a variety of food is eaten as part of a healthy balanced diet.

# ELSA'S PROTEIN GAP

If we look at Elsa's example, the difference between the protein her body needed and what she actually received, was around 40g in protein.



To fill a protein gap as described in this case, Elsa would need to eat the amount of protein included in one of the following portions of food in addition to her current intake:



This example is for illustrative purposes only and we would always recommend a variety of food is eaten as part of a healthy balanced diet.

# HINTS AND TIPS FOR IMPROVING NUTRITIONAL INTAKE

If you are worried that someone you care for is struggling to eat enough food, trying to base their meals and snacks on the following foods may help, as they are high in energy and protein.

## Food which provides protein and energy:

- Meat, oily fish, eggs, nuts, and full fat dairy (such as milk, yoghurt or cheese).

## Foods which are a great source of energy:

- Pasta, potatoes, bread, rice, crackers or oatcakes, and snacks (such as biscuits, cakes, chocolate or crisps).

Furthermore, some practical tips to help improve nutritional intake include:

- [Eating small, frequent meals](#) and snacks every 2-3 hours.
- [Avoid drinking fluids with meals](#) which may reduce how much is eaten.
- [Get some fresh air](#) outside or sit by an open window prior to, or



# WHAT HAPPENS IF FOOD IS NOT ENOUGH?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet plays a key role in keeping the body strong. Living with a medical condition, or recovering from an illness or operation, can put a strain on the body. It can be hard to get enough food at these times, which can weaken the body further.

## WHAT IS MEDICAL NUTRITION?

Medical nutrition products are specialised foods designed to meet the nutritional needs of those living with a medical condition, recovering from an illness or operation, or those who have become weak and frail over time. They are often referred to as Oral Nutritional Supplements (ONS) and are typically used for those who find it difficult to get adequate nutrition from a normal diet alone.

The nutritional composition of ONS is based on extensive scientific and clinical research, and in many cases its use is recommended in international and professional guidelines. Products are generally available in the form of a powder or liquid drink containing energy, protein, vitamins and minerals.

Medical nutrition products are usually prescribed by a healthcare professional and must be used under medical supervision.

## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ORAL NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS AVAILABLE

ONS are available in a variety of formats and styles, including milkshake-, juice-, yogurt-, and dessert-style, as well as a variety of flavours to suit different taste preferences.

**High protein, nutrient-dense, low volume** ONS are sometimes recommended for those who are unwell or are recovering from illness. These milkshake style drinks can help make it easier to get the energy and nutrients needed, even if the person you care for has a small appetite or is not feeling well. Many people find it difficult to finish large volumes of drinks and a low volume ONS may be preferred in these cases.

If you have any questions about the use of medical nutrition products, please speak to your healthcare professional. Further information can be found at [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org) or by calling the Nutricia Resource Centre on 0845 250 1011.

## SPEAK TO THEIR GP

If you are worried the person you are caring for is struggling with a normal diet, the practical tips within this leaflet can help improve nutritional intake with food. You could also ask a pharmacist whether a nutritional drink in a powdered format, such as Complan, available from supermarkets and pharmacies, is a suitable option alongside normal foods and drinks.

However, should you continue to be concerned about the nutritional intake of the person you care for, please speak to their GP or other healthcare professional about your concerns and whether medical nutrition is right for them.

Further information can be found at [www.carersuk.org/nutrition](http://www.carersuk.org/nutrition), by calling the Nutricia helpline on 0845 250 1011.



# ABOUT CARERS UK

## HOWEVER CARING AFFECTS YOU AND YOUR FAMILY, WE'RE HERE

As the UK's only national membership charity for carers, we're a supportive community and a movement for change.

We give expert advice, information and support.

We connect carers so no one has to care alone.

We campaign together for lasting change.

We innovate to find new ways to reach and support carers.

Visit our website to join us, support us or get information and advice on caring:

**[www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)**

# ABOUT NUTRICIA

Nutricia Ltd specialises in the delivery of medical nutrition products and services for all who need it, spanning from the very young to the elderly. We supply high quality feeds, equipment and support services to patients and healthcare professionals. Through our Nutricia Homeward service we deliver feeds, feeding pumps, equipment and nursing care direct to patients' homes.



Carers UK is working in partnership with Nutricia Ltd to help improve understanding about nutrition and caring. The partnership provides carers with information and resources on nutritional care for both themselves and the person they care for.

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Carers UK includes Carers Wales, Carers Scotland and Carers NI — visit our website to find out more and get in touch: [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org).

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