Is Undernutrition Related to Increased Use of Health Care Among Older Adults?

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“Yes,” say Lister Hill scholars Meredith Kilgore and Julie Locher and colleagues. “In this study of older adults receiving Medicare home health services, those who were malnourished or at risk for malnourishment at baseline were subsequently more likely to be hospitalized, to have an emergency room visit, to use home health aides, or to die, than the participants who were not malnourished. Furthermore, overweight and obese patients who were malnourished or at risk for malnourishment at baseline were subsequently also more likely to enter a nursing home.”

Nutrition contributes to improved function and health for persons of all ages. Older adults are more likely than younger persons to be malnourished and there is evidence that undernutrition is common in the geriatric population but is underestimated by health care providers and therefore not addressed. The consequences of undiagnosed undernutrition in older adults receiving Medicare home health care services because of an acute or chronic illness may be especially severe. Inadequate caloric intake may affect the course of illness or be made worse by illness or treatment.

Participants in the study were 198 homebound older adults receiving Medicare home health services. They were administered a questionnaire in their homes at baseline and were measured for height and weight if they could stand. Follow-up was conducted at six months and one year to assess health services utilization and mortality status. At baseline, 12% of the patients were malnourished and 51% were at risk for malnourishment. Based on body mass index (BMI), 8% of participants were underweight, 38% were normal weight, 25% were overweight, and 29% were obese. Overweight and obese patients were just as likely to be either malnourished or at risk for malnourishment as patients having a BMI within a normal range.

“Rising health care costs and consumer preference for aging-in-place highlight the need for greater attention devoted to nutritional matters with a goal of preventing costly and unnecessary health services utilization and mortality,” say the researchers. “Further work is warranted investigating whether nutritional interventions can address undernutrition and its aftereffects in homebound older adults.”