

Designing meals for elderly with eating difficulties: a cooperative approach

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Background

Approximately 15 % of the Scandinavian population aged 60 and above suffer from eating difficulties, thereby facing loss of independence and the risk of malnutrition. This new, multi-disciplinary project concerns the design of meals and eating aids for those who experience difficulties in transporting food from the plate to the mouth. The first part of the project investigates the needs, preferences and problems in the elderly's every-day life while the second part will focus on solutions in cooperation with the stake-holders.

Materials and methods

The nutritional status, food choice and preferences as well as the meal situation of home-living elderly (65+) has been investigated through the review of peer-reviewed research publications and in-depth interviews (N=14), surveys and observation studies. Eating difficulties is a very sensitive matter and few elderly were willing to participate in this type of project. Data is currently analysed and only preliminary results are presented here.



Results

The informants express that remaining independent in respect to eating is highly valued, illustrated by the response to the question What does it mean to you to be able to eat independently:

"It means half my life, if I am to express myself, because in that case I still decide a little bit. Feels important to cook your own food but if one cannot manage one must get help. The personality disappears."

Male, 81 years

Elderly suffering from e.g. hand tremor or difficulties in gripping often develop strategies to remain independent, of which one may be to omit meal constituents affecting the sensory and nutritional quality of the meal. Traditional dishes are appreciated but preferences vary widely. The foods and flavors from early life is not very influential on today's diet but meal patterns often remain from those days.

The eating situation is often associated with guilt and shame, and social withdrawal is therefore a common scenario:

"It is horrible to say but I cannot handle the cutlery, knife and fork, in a normal way so I refrain from eating out with others"

Male, years

Conclusion

Remaining independent in respect to eating is highly valued among elderly. By integrating various dimensions of the meal, including nutritional and sensory aspects, in the development of functional eating aids, the possibility of a healthy and independent living among elderly increases.