

Do ready meals provide adequate nutritional value for the elderly?

The UK is the biggest market for ready meals in Europe, and the single elderly rely more on ready meals than any other group in British society. But do these meals provide adequate nutritional value? A recent editorial suggests there are grounds for concern.

On the positive side, popular ready meal versions of dishes like roast dinners and shepherd's pie are good sources of protein, which is particularly important for the elderly. And labels warn the consumer of some drawbacks, like when there are high levels of salt and saturated fat. But the levels of key desirable nutrients - such as healthful omega-3 fats and micronutrients like vitamins and phytochemicals - are not so apparent. In most cases there is no obligation to provide this information. Yet many surveys suggest that nutrients like these are deficient in the elderly. It is not known to what extent an over-reliance on ready meals of low nutritional value may be contributing to these deficiencies.

Supplements can only partially compensate for deficiencies since they do not provide adequate dietary fibre or antioxidant phytochemicals. A recent report from the Joint Research Council of the European Commission concluded that a better way to bridge any nutrient gaps is by obtaining essential nutrients such as vitamins and minerals from natural food sources. In particular, the report highlighted the strong evidence base for the benefits of the Mediterranean Diet (MD). This diet has been shown to be the best way of achieving recommended levels of a wide range of nutrients. Moreover, the MD promotes health, increases longevity and reduces the risk of age-related diseases of particular concern to the elderly, such as Alzheimer's disease and age-related macular degeneration.

Many elderly people aspire to eat food of a high nutritional standard, as epitomised by the MD. But a range of social and medical factors can deplete the motivation to shop for and cook such ingredients, so the ready meal becomes a frequent alternative. Hence, for the health of the ageing population, it is crucial that ready meals are produced to a high nutritional standard.

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