

# FOOD AND DRINK IN LATER LIFE: THE ROLE OF HOMECARE

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**BACKGROUND.** Most research on older people's needs related to food and drink has focused on care homes or hospitals. Less is known about older people living at home, especially those who use homecare services (also known as domiciliary care or help-at-home). Previous studies have found that older people living at home, especially those using homecare, are at risk of malnutrition and dehydration.

This may be caused by different, but often overlapping, problems. These include changes to appetite or taste in later life, difficulty chewing or swallowing, dietary restrictions due to health problems, and reduced mobility that affects whether people can prepare food, memory problems, being socially isolated, difficulty in getting to shops or affording to buy food.

## The Importance of Homecare

Alongside support from healthcare and family or friends, home care services offer an important way of supporting older people with these problems. Homecare can help older people living at home to live well, so they can access

the food and drink they want, when they want, and how they want. This not only reduces the risk of malnutrition and dehydration, but also means that people stay healthy and live well.

In this study, we wanted to understand what is already known about the topic of how homecare supports older people with food and drink. This is so that we have a clearer idea of what needs to be done in research, as well as in adult social care policy and practice, to support older adults with food and drink in later life.

We did this by:

- Analysing a national dataset called the Adult Social Care Survey (ASCS) collected from older people in England, from 2011 to 2022, that included a question about their food and drink needs. This question referred to the person's quality of life related to food and drink, which considered their wishes and preferences – as well as, whether they were able to get enough to eat and drink to stay healthy and well.
- Identifying studies about the role of homecare in supporting older adults' food and drink needs. The aim was to help us understand what is already known. It also helped us to identify priorities for future research.

Here we give an overview of the key findings from the analysis of the national data sets and past studies.



**ANALYSIS OF THE ADULT SOCIAL CARE SURVEY (ASCS).** The analysis of ASCS data revealed that:

- Self-reported unmet needs related to food and drink have increased from **4.3%** of older people surveyed in 2011 to **8.1%** in 2022 in England.
- This increase has been reported both by older people who receive publicly managed or funded support and those who use homecare for other types of support, but not help with eating and drinking.
- Investing into social care for older adults, on average, is associated with lower levels of unmet need related to food and drink. This shows that investment into adult social care services, including homecare, makes a positive difference to older peoples' lives.

**THE ROLE OF HOME CARE – WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN?** We searched through all studies published since 2000, to find relevant articles. We found 22 studies that talked about the role of homecare in supporting older adults' food and drink needs.

We found that:

- ❖ Some studies explored how homecare positively supports older people with their food and drink needs, through a person-centred care approach. This places the older person and (where appropriate) their family and support network as an equal partner in planning care. It also carefully considers the person's preferences and wishes.
- ❖ Homecare activities related to food and drink are varied. They include:
  - a) Support with preparing meals, assistance with eating or drinking, monitoring whether a person eats and drinks enough, and changes in weight and ability to carry out everyday activities.
  - b) Support with socialising, maintaining independence and dignity; for example, involving a person in choosing ingredients or preparing food accordingly to their strengths and needs, and supporting socialisation around food (for example, eating together).

However, we also found that:

- ❖ Older people's needs related to food and drink are often understood medically. There can be a narrow focus on malnutrition and dehydration – whether people eat and drink enough.
- ❖ Little attention is given to whether older people also enjoy what they eat and drink and whether they can socialise or stay active around food and drink (for example, by preparing meals, choosing ingredients, eating with others). These are important aspects of eating and drinking and can support someone to stay healthy and also to live well.
- ❖ The contribution of homecare to supporting older people in these ways is often overlooked and undervalued.
- ❖ Short visits, due to funding cuts, often limited between 15 to 30 minutes, do not always allow enough time to carry out important tasks related to food and drink in a person-centred way.
- ❖ Limited investment and time also limit collaboration with other healthcare professionals (like, community dietitians) and family carers, which would improve the care received by older people living at home.

**If you would like to know more about this project, please:**

✉ Send an email to **Dr Stacey Rand** at [s.e.rand@kent.ac.uk](mailto:s.e.rand@kent.ac.uk)

🌐 Visit the project website: [www.pssru.ac.uk/foodanddrink](http://www.pssru.ac.uk/foodanddrink).

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