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Volunteer Mealtime Assistance Training

Welcome to Alberta Health Services (AHS), Mealtime Assistance Training!

Your role as a volunteer assisting with mealtimes is important as you are actively helping to make sure that our vulnerable patients\(^1\) eat and drink the food and beverages necessary to support their health. When you help someone during mealtime you play a role in helping them get better and contribute towards the prevention and treatment of malnutrition.

Poor appetite and difficulties with eating and drinking are commonly identified by the care team as challenges shared by patients. With appropriate training, volunteers like you can offer the support, companionship, and encouragement needed at mealtime that will have a significant impact in patients’ quality of life and overall health.

Mealtime assistance can mean many things, from conversing with patients to brighten their day, opening packages, cutting food, or making foods more accessible for patients. As you get to know your patient(s), you will better understand their individual needs. Familiarity with the meals served in your facility can also support your success with mealtime assistance. Your Volunteer Coordinator can request a meal tray from Nutrition and Food Services to use in your training. Use all your senses to experience the meal from a patient perspective!

As a Mealtime Assistant, you will have a positive impact on patient’s nutritional and social wellbeing. Best of all, you will have the satisfaction of helping others and getting to know some very interesting people. We hope you will enjoy volunteering with us!

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\(^1\) Patient: means an adult or child who receives or has requested health care or services from Alberta Health Services and its health care providers or individuals authorized to act on behalf of Alberta Health Services. This term is inclusive of residents, patients and outpatients.

Uneaten food has NO nutritional value. Every bite counts!
Section 1: Why Do We Eat and Drink?

- To maintain health
- To satisfy hunger or thirst
- For pleasure
- For social interaction
- To celebrate
- Many more reasons ...

We must remember that when we sit down to help someone eat, it becomes a true social occasion for them, especially in a health care setting which can be quite lonely. Sharing a meal with another person can make a major contribution to their quality of life.

Section 2: Benefits of Eating Well and Staying Hydrated

- Fight infections
- Avoid skin breakdown
- Build strength for activities and movement
- Improve mental alertness
- Contribute to a reduced length of stay
- Recover faster (acute care and rehab)

Eating a healthy diet and drinking enough liquids can contribute to an overall sense of well-being. As a volunteer, you can help to make sure the patients realize the benefits from maximizing their intake at mealtime.

Food should be given the same level of importance as medicine!
Section 3: Factors Affecting What and How Patients Eat

There are many factors that can lead to a patient being undernourished or malnourished before they are admitted or during their stay.

- Decreased physical activity
- Physical disability (e.g. arthritis, stroke)
- Medical diagnosis or conditions
- Inability to eat independently
- Effects of medication
- A change in eating habits, food likes and dislikes
- Cultural or religious restrictions
- Dementia and mental illness
- Social isolation and loneliness

As we age, our bodies go through physical and mental changes that can impact our ability to select, consume and enjoy food. Once you understand the influence these changes have, you can offer the support needed to help reduce the impact of these age-related changes and encourage the patient to eat.
Section 4: Swallowing Difficulties

When eating, some patients can experience swallowing difficulties that can place them at risk for choking or aspiration of foods or liquids. When food or liquid slip into the airway or further into the lungs, they can cause obstruction (choking) and aspiration pneumonia, which can be life threatening.

Volunteers may be asked to assist with patients that have known swallowing difficulties. If the patient requests additional food/drink items from the fridge/cupboard, volunteers are to provide these items ONLY if nursing approves. You MUST ask nursing staff if it is safe to provide specific additional food/drink items before providing them to the patient. (When in doubt, do not provide any additional food/drink items)

If you suspect swallowing difficulties, tell the nurse in charge. ²

If you are sitting with someone at mealtime there are signs to watch for to help you recognize if they are having trouble with the swallowing process

- Coughing or choking
- Changes to the voice after a swallow (such as gurgling or hoarseness)
- Frequent throat clearing
- Watery eyes
- Runny nose
- Facial grimacing
- Complaints of food getting “stuck”
- Complaints of pain with swallowing
- Food left in the mouth after swallowing
- Drooling
- Difficulty breathing
- Eating slowly
- Regurgitation
- Heartburn

(Amy Speech and Language Therapy, Inc., 2010)

Call loudly for HELP from nursing staff immediately and (if available) pull or press patient’s call bell if the patient becomes distressed and/or you feel they are in need of immediate medical attention (i.e. choking). Stay with the patient.

² AHS Guideline: Choking Prevention and Management (PS-88-01)
### Section 5: Opening Packages

Opening packages can be a challenge for many patients! Below is a quick reference guide on opening the various packages you may come across.

#### When helping patients open packages:

1. **ASK:** Only open the packages the patient agrees to. Ex: Would you like me to open any packages for you?
2. **AVOID:** Contaminating the food. Do not directly touch the food or the part the patient eats or drinks from.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Package Type</th>
<th>Instructions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Peel Back Top (Pudding, Yogurt, Hummus, Fruit Cups)</td>
<td>Grasp the tab and pull back the top. Tilt the product backward and away from the patient so that the contents do not spray them when the container is opened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>Grasp the tab and pull back the top. Tilt the product backward and away from the patient so that the contents do not spray them when the container is opened.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soup and Mug Lids</td>
<td>Holding the edge of lid, pull the top off.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Squeeze Pouch (Ketchup, Soy Sauce, Hot Sauce)</td>
<td>Tear the package vertically. Ask the patient if they would like the contents to be poured onto their food and where. Lean the package up against the plate so it does not leak onto their table or tray.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foil Bags (Toast and Pastries)</td>
<td>Unroll the top and open the bag so the patient can grab the food from inside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese</td>
<td>Grasp both sides of the cheese and pull the package open.</td>
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Section 6: The Mealtime Experience

As a volunteer, you play an important role in the meal experience! The activities you perform prior, during and after the meal are equally important and positively contribute to enhancing the mealtime for the patient.

Patients receiving assistance at mealtimes appreciate the support you provide. When you enjoy your experience providing mealtime assistance, your positive feelings will be communicated to them and they will benefit. If you are frustrated with “the task”, they may feel your discontentment just as easily. Helping someone enjoy one of life’s basic pleasures, eating, is a wonderful way to show you care.

Assistance such as helping with opening packages and being a meal time companion can really help enhance the patient meal experience and result in them eating better.

✔ Positioning

Proper positioning is extremely important to prevent choking and improve patient access to their meal. Volunteers are NOT to position patients, but it is your responsibility to ensure that you and the patient are positioned properly for meals. During the meal, if the patient’s position shifts, seek nursing assistance to have the patient repositioned properly.

1. Patient should be as upright as possible.
2. Patient’s head should be upright and tilted slightly forward.
3. Volunteer should be at eye level with the patient.
4. Try to keep the utensil where the patient can see it.

The patient should remain upright for 30 minutes after the meal to reduce the risk of any remaining food or drink residue entering the lungs.
This picture shows proper positioning for patients for safe and enjoyable eating.

(O'Loughlin & Shanley, 1996)
**Mealtime Assistance Tasks**

(Lunch meal 11:00-1:00 or Supper meal 4:30-6:30)

Upon arrival to the unit: (Lunch meal 11:00 or Supper meal 4:30)

1. As you arrive on the unit, wash/sanitize your hands (refer to Volunteer Handbook p. 23-25) and ask the unit clerk at the front desk for the nurse in charge or the dietitian.
2. Use N.O.D (Name, Occupation and Duty) to introduce yourself; “Hi, I’m Jessica with Volunteer Resources. I’m here today to assist with meals”.
3. Access the Volunteer Mealtime Assistance Communication book and review which patients have been identified as requiring mealtime assistance.
4. If you have any immediate concerns, discuss with nurse in charge or dietitian.

Prior to and During the Meal: (Lunch meal 11:30 or Supper meal 5:00)

1. As meal trays arrive, attend to the patients rooms as requested in order of lowest to highest numbered room (ie 61 - 79 - 4)
2. Use N.O.D (Name, Occupation and Duty) to introduce yourself; “Hi, I’m Jessica with Volunteer Resources. I’m here today to assist you with your meal”.  **YOU MUST NOT FEED PATIENTS.**
3. Ask the patient what they would like to be called and use their name often in conversations and during the meal.
4. The patient should be in an upright position to prevent choking and to allow for safe swallowing. If the patient needs to be re-positioned, **DO NOT LIFT THE PATIENT YOURSELF.** Rather, ask nursing staff to properly position the patient for you.
5. Check with the patient to ensure that dentures, glasses and/or hearing aids are in place, and if not, ask nursing staff to assist him/her to get them in place.
6. Ensure you wash your hands thoroughly before assisting each patient, before and after glove use or if your hands are visibly soiled. (refer to Volunteer Handbook p. 23-25)
7. Encourage as much independence as possible. Only open packages the patient agrees to (see Section 5: Opening Packages)
8. Ask patient if they need any additional items (such as water or condiments available) and if nursing approves, retrieve these items from the patient nourishment area.
9. Encourage meal intake by reminding them of what their choices on the tray are.
10. During the meal, make light, natural conversation, offer positive comments on how good the food looks and smells and encourage food and fluid intake.
11. If you have any immediate concerns, discuss with the nurse in charge or Dietitian.
After the Meal Service: (Lunch meal 12:45 or Supper meal 6:15)

1. Complete the Volunteer section of the Volunteer Mealtime Assistance Communication book. Include information including your first name and last name initial and additional comments such as how well did the patient eat (poor, moderately, well) and does the patient have any concerns/requests about their meals or with to see the dietitian.

2. Wash/sanitize your hands (refer to Volunteer Handbook p. 23-25) and check out with nurse in charge or dietitian prior to leaving the unit.

Thank you for enhancing the patient meal experience!

References:


