

## BRIEFING NOTE



**This project is being run by Chelmsford Borough Council's Environmental Services Department, with funding from the Food Standards Agency. It is supported by Mid Essex PCT and the Healthy Living Solutions.**

### **Background**

Older people are considered to be a vulnerable group in relation to both food safety and nutrition. The effects of food poisoning on an older person are more severe – recovery is slower and they are less able to cope with the symptoms. Older people also have specific nutritional requirements in order to maintain good health, of which many are unaware.

### **Aims**

We are aiming to improve food safety and healthy eating amongst the elderly, by giving out information direct to them through lunch clubs, and by enlisting the support of groups of professionals and volunteers, who come into direct contact with the elderly in their homes eg home helps, district nurses, wardens, meals on wheels etc.

### **The Quiz**

During October we visited 5 'pilot' lunch clubs, where a total of 127 elderly people participated in a quiz. The quiz included questions on nutrition and food safety, the answers to which have given us an idea of how much knowledge the elderly already have about these issues. As a thank you for joining in, all completed quizzes were entered into a prize draw, and a £20 Tesco gift card was awarded at each of the 5 lunch clubs for the entry drawn out. Our pilot lunch clubs were:-

- 18<sup>th</sup> October, Age Concern (Chelmsford), Cottage Place
- 20<sup>th</sup> October, Food On Fridays, Tile Kiln
- 24<sup>th</sup> October, Lunch at One, Baptist Church
- 25<sup>th</sup> October, Church of the Holy Spirit, Forest Drive
- 31<sup>st</sup> October, Salvation Army, Baddow Road

The results of the quiz demonstrate that most of the elderly are aware of the importance of a nutritional diet in later life. However, they don't necessarily know that they should be including certain types of food in their diet, in order to obtain the nutrients particularly appropriate to them.



## The Most Significant Gaps in Knowledge

Although many knew that a balanced and varied diet is comprised of several different food groups, there was a significantly fewer number of people who included dairy products in their answer. Dairy products are particularly important in the diet of an older person, because they provide calcium, which is essential to keep their bones healthy.

Nearly everybody answered that fresh food provides the best nutrition. As access to fresh food is difficult for some elderly people, it is important to emphasise that frozen, tinned and dried foods can be equally nutritious. We should be encouraging them to keep a stock of a variety of foods in their cupboards and freezer, in case they can't get out.

Not many people knew that exposing their skin to sunlight helps to maintain levels of vitamin D in their bodies, which helps the body to absorb calcium. Getting outside is a problem for some elderly people, and even when they do go out, they wrap themselves up, because they feel the cold. As a result, they have an increased risk of a vitamin D deficiency, therefore it is particularly important for them to eat foods rich in vitamin D, or even to take supplements.

There was some confusion over how much fluid they should be drinking, although most people gave either 3-5 or 6-8 glasses a day as their answer. The advice is actually to drink 6-8 cups a day, of which at least 2 should be water. The remainder can consist of any other fluids, but with a limit on beverages containing caffeine, as these cause the body to lose water.

A significant number of people thought it necessary to add salt to food before eating it. Although we require some salt in our diet, we get enough naturally through the food we eat. Older people in particular should not be adding more, as it contributes to high blood pressure and strokes.

Most people stated that fridges should run at either 0-5, or 5-10 degrees. The correct answer was that fridges should run at 0-5 degrees in order to slow down the growth of bacteria.

There was clearly some confusion over 'use by' and 'best before' dates. Foods which have a 'Use By' date are usually those which are likely to support the growth of bacteria (known as high risk foods). They have a short shelf life, and need to be kept in the fridge to slow down the growth of bacteria. They should be used by their 'Use By' date, or within 3 days of being opened, whichever is the earlier, as it might not be safe to eat.

Foods with a 'Best Before' date are usually those which have a long shelf life and do not need to be kept in the fridge eg dried and tinned foods. When a food has past its 'Best Before' date, it might not be as good to eat, but is unlikely to be unsafe. However, once food has been opened, it should be kept in the fridge and used within 3 days.

### Programme

During late November, early December and into the New Year, we will be providing information direct to the elderly, via lunch clubs, aiming to raise their awareness and increase their knowledge about the nutrition and food safety issues that affect them. This will take the form of presentations

and information stands, where leaflets, fridge thermometers, shelf life tags and other promotional 'goodies' will be distributed.

The key messages we are hoping to get across, but with particular emphasis on those areas identified by the quiz, are:-



## NUTRITION

1. Eat a wide variety of food to help keep you healthy and protect you from nutrient deficiency – follow the food guide pyramid to get a good balance.
2. Try to eat at least 5 portions of fruit or vegetables every day. Remember that only one portion can be as juice.
3. Eat a variety of calcium-rich foods to protect your bones.
4. Eat foods containing vitamin D to help your body absorb the calcium. Try and spend some time regularly outdoors - the sun on your skin will help your body make it's own vitamin D.
5. Drink at least 6-8 large cups of fluid a day, including at least 2 glasses of water, to meet daily fluid needs and help prevent constipation.
6. Eat plenty of foods high in fibre to help prevent constipation.
7. Achieve and maintain a healthy weight – excess weight gain and sudden, unplanned weight loss can both lead to health problems.
8. Reduce the quantity of salt in your diet.
9. Make sure you have well fitting teeth or take good care of your own teeth.
10. Make sure you have a variety of tinned, dried and frozen food in your store cupboard, just in case you can't get out for your shopping.



## FOOD SAFETY

1. Make sure chilled food is kept in the fridge until you need it.
2. Make sure the temperature of your fridge is between 0 and 5 degrees Celsius – use a fridge thermometer to help you check.

3. Once fresh food has been opened, don't keep it longer than 3 days - use a shelf life tag to remind you, if you have one.
4. Make sure food is cooked properly, especially meat, poultry and eggs.
5. Make sure reheated food is piping hot, and never reheat it a second time.
6. Make sure food is 'in-date' – look at the 'use by' date to help you check.
7. Don't use food if the packaging is damaged
8. Make sure surfaces and utensils are clean.
9. Always wash your hands before touching food.
10. Keep food covered until you need it.

At the same time, we are intending to hold briefing sessions for the professionals and volunteers, to ask for their support in distributing information and reinforcing our message when they visit the elderly in their own homes.

There will also be other activities, such as providing an input at the Council Forum for Older People, and information events at Supported Housing schemes..

## **Evaluation**

Towards the end of the project, we will be revisiting the 5 'pilot' lunch clubs, and asking the elderly to complete the same questionnaire again, to evaluate whether or not our project has been successful in improving their knowledge of nutrition and food safety.

## **Seminar**

On 15<sup>th</sup> February 2007, we will be holding a seminar, to which we will invite all those who work with the elderly and who have participated in the project. There will be guest speakers to give presentations on food safety, nutrition, osteoporosis, keeping hydrated, and keeping active. We are also hoping to be able to report on the outcome of the project.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION SO FAR – for further information contact Sue Reed or Christine Bell at Chelmsford Borough Council on 01245 606286

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