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Factors Influencing Nutrition Risk
of Older New Zealanders

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Rosemary Joy Carr
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Abstract

As the population ages it is increasingly important to understand the factors influencing dietary habits of older people. Social, biological and psychological factors influence food intake and affect nutrition risk among older people living in the community.

The purpose of this study was to identify food-related behaviours that place older people at nutrition risk and to evaluate older peoples perceptions and experiences of various nutrition support options.

Fifty-one community living people aged between 80 and 85 years were recruited in North Shore City. Food-related behaviours were explored with the use of three quantitative tools. Practitioner Assessment of Network Type (PANT) was used to evaluate social networks. Elderly Assessment System (EASY-Care) was used to evaluate physical and mental wellbeing. Seniors in the Community: Risk Evaluation for Eating and Nutrition Version II (SCREEN II) assessed nutrition risk. Five people participated in a qualitative interview about nutrition support they had received.

A third of the participants (31 percent) were found to be at nutrition risk. Two-thirds (67 percent) showed some evidence of disability and needed assistance with everyday tasks. Nearly half (47 percent) of these older people had supportive social networks including close relationships with local family, friends and neighbours. There was an inverse linear relationship between participants self-rated health and nutrition risk ($p < .001$). Those who perceived their health to be fair or poor were more likely to be at nutrition risk.

The importance of social contact, a sense of gratitude, getting a meal and meeting the need were common themes that emerged from interviews with participants who received nutrition support.

These findings indicate that nutrition risk may be prevalent among community living older people in New Zealand. Strategies and initiatives are needed to encourage independent living and to help older people with the procurement, preparation, cooking and sharing of enjoyable meals.

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