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*Listening, learning,
and living together:
it's the science of life.*

Promoting Healthy Appetite in Elders¹

Linda Bobroff²

Decreased appetite (or anorexia) is a topic we typically associate with headlines about teenaged girls with a clinical condition called anorexia nervosa. Anorexia among the elderly is a very different situation which can result from a number of causes, such as changes in taste, smell or gastric function, dental problems, overmedication or drug interactions, illness, loneliness, or depression.

One complication of loss of appetite among the elderly is that the reduced calorie intake in older persons can affect their energy level, immune function, and overall quality of life. Also, unintended weight loss can be a risk factor for frail older persons.

There are steps that aging adults and/or their families can take to promote a healthy appetite and improve food intake. Prepare and serve tasty foods to stimulate appetite and improve enjoyment of food. Use a variety of herbs and spices in cooking, rather than salt, to avoid unwanted effects on blood pressure. Dental researchers recommend tongue brushing to improve taste acuity in older persons.

Since older family members may get full more quickly than they did when they were younger, small meals and snacks are appropriate. If loss of appetite is severe, have the pharmacist check all medications to see if they may be the cause. Perhaps one or more medications can be changed or adjusted.

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And finally, help the elderly fight loneliness and depression. Sharing meals with friends or family members can promote healthful appetites in older persons who may spend a lot of time alone.

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