



Identifying undernutrition in seniors

Community organization volunteers play an important role in helping identify seniors who may be experiencing nutritional vulnerability. This sheet outlines some of the **warning signs of possible undernutrition** or risk of undernutrition and serves as a guide to easily gather pertinent information from seniors.

For each warning sign, the table presents actual situations that you may notice while **observing** the person or their environment, or comments that you may **hear** from the person or those around them.

Warning signs are changes that you have noticed in the person compared to previous visits. The **notion of change** is very important. Even just one of the 5 warning signs is indicative of a need for action.

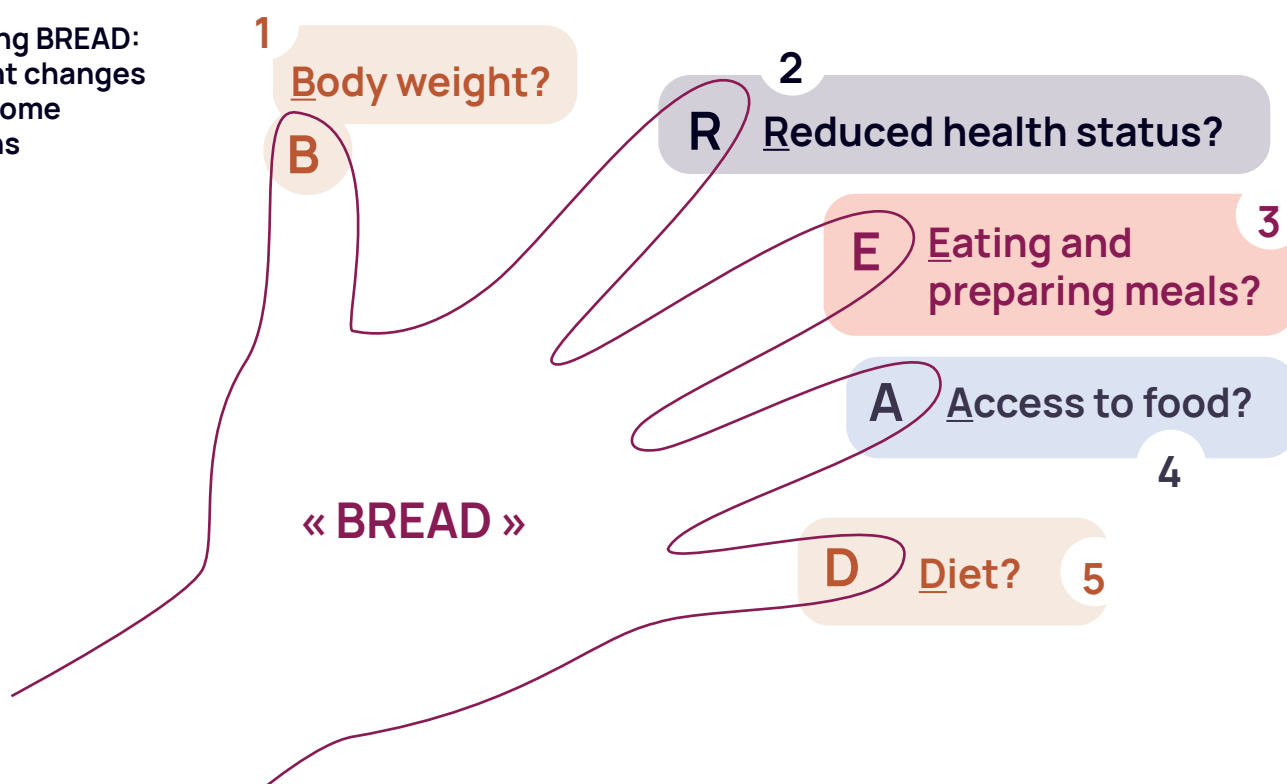
The “Possible Questions” column of the table suggests how to approach the situations to help you gather important information.

TIP

You don't need to know the following table by heart. We suggest that you keep the **5 main warning signs** at your fingertips and discuss them in a friendly manner with the individual.

This illustration provides a simple summary. Relevant questions will come to you naturally if you have read the table carefully a few times. Trust yourself!

Identifying BREAD:
important changes
or worrisome
situations



5 WARNING SIGNS



Have you noticed any change during your follow-up visits?

Identifying **BREAD**: significant changes or worrisome situations

BODY WEIGHT?

- Wears oversized clothes;
- Has sunken cheeks or noticeable bones under the skin (collarbone, hands, forearms);
- Mentions having to buy new clothes because their old ones are too big now.

1

REDUCED HEALTH STATUS?

- Repeated falls with resulting bruises, sprains, fractures or bandages and casts
- Mentions major health complaints:
- Significant diarrhea or vomiting over several days
- Significant unrelieved pain affecting daily life
- Mood and attitude change (low morale)
- Daily routine greatly affected by forgetfulness: gets lost in town or has difficulty finding their way home; regularly forgets to take their medication; forgets appointments and has several unpaid bills.

2

EATING AND PREPARING MEALS?

- Difficulty preparing food and cooking meals (and washing dishes):
- Doesn't know how to prepare food or cook meals;
- No longer wants to cook or has difficulty cooking (forgets how, organization problems, weakness, fatigue, apathy);
- Having to wash dishes makes them not want to cook meals.
- Difficulty handling utensils:
- Getting food to their mouth (possible reasons: shaky hands, not gripping their fork properly due to possible arthritis; general weakness, obvious vision problem);
- Difficulty chewing food;
- Difficulty swallowing food.



3

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Use these questions as a guide to discuss the situation in a friendly manner.

TIP : Leave a moment of silence after your question and be prepared to hear the answers at any time during your visit.

“Do you find it difficult to...”:

- Choose comfortable clothes; do you wear bigger clothes to be comfortable?
- Do you need a belt to hold up your pants?



- How is your health?
- How is your morale?
- Do you feel like making your meals?
- Does this situation affect your day a lot?
- What happened?
- How did you get injured or get that big bruise?
- How long have you been experiencing this situation (or condition)?
- Does this happen often?

“Do you find it difficult to...”:

- Cook; make your meals or feel like making them?
- Use your utensils to cut, peel, grate, chop or purée your food?
- Lift your pots and pans?
- Wash your dishes?
- Get food to your mouth with your fork or spoon?
- Chew? Do you find it more difficult to chew than you used to?
- Swallow without coughing, without reflux or without choking?
- Brush your teeth or clean your dentures? Do your dentures fit properly? Do your teeth or gums hurt?

5 WARNING SIGNS



Have you noticed any change during your follow-up visits?



Identifying **BREAD**: significant changes or worrisome situations

ACCESS TO FOOD?

- Mentions having difficulty getting transportation to go grocery shopping;
- Mentions uncertainty about having their groceries delivered;
- Expresses fear of running out of food or not having enough money to buy food;
- Their fridge and pantry are empty (if possible to see);
- No longer uses their usual means of transportation to do their errands (bus, taxi);
- No longer uses their usual means of communication to shop from home (telephone, internet);
- Is no longer able to walk a few minutes at a normal pace (shortness of breath, weakness and pain make it more difficult to go to grocery stores).

4



DIET (EATING AND DRINKING LESS)

- Eats fewer than 3 meals a day;
- Doesn't eat enough protein foods (e.g., meat, poultry, fish, tofu, legumes);
- Mentions loss of appetite, no longer feeling hungry, loss of desire to eat, refusal to eat or prolonged fasting;
- Excludes many foods from their diet for any reason;
- Mentions always eating the same thing;
- Only eats easy-to-prepare foods (toast, breakfast cereals, canned soup, frozen pizza, crackers, chips, candies);
- Drinks significantly less or not at all;
- Smokes more or drinks more alcohol (this could affect their appetite among other things).

5

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Use these questions as a guide to discuss the situation in a friendly manner.

TIP : Leave a moment of silence after your question and be prepared to hear the answers at any time during your visit.

“Do you find it difficult to...”:

- Stock up on food?
- Get to the grocery store to do your shopping?
- Get transportation to do your errands?
- Get help from friends or family to do your errands?
- Take a bus or taxi alone?
- Have your purchases delivered?
- Be able to afford your groceries?
- Buy food from your grocery store by phone (or online, if applicable)?
- Walk 10 minutes without being too out of breath?

“Do you find it difficult to...”:

- Eat and drink (feel like...)?
- Prepare and cook meals?
- Eat 3 meals a day that include proteins like meat (beef, pork,...), chicken, fish, eggs, legumes (e.g., beans) or peanut butter?
- Vary you meals?

Sheet #3 provides guidance on what can be done to help seniors with warning signs, while respecting their wishes and your limits.

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