

Food Related Challenges and Issues Faced by New Brunswick Seniors Living in their Own Home

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Introduction

The number of seniors is projected to increase over the next decade and continue to rise in the following decades [1]. The issues and challenges faced by New Brunswick seniors living in their own home were studied recently [2-6]. Too many seniors are not able to afford healthy food or enough food to maintain their health as they age [7-8]. Healthy eating is one of the main factors in ensuring healthy aging and should therefore be an important consideration when determining a senior's capacity to remain in his or her own home. Little is known about how seniors, and particularly frail seniors, manage the challenges of maintaining healthy eating habits in their home. An exploratory qualitative study was conducted among seniors aged 65 and over living in New Brunswick.

The objectives of this study were to collect the food perceptions and experiences of seniors and identify the challenges they face in order to eat well and stay in their home.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from thirty-nine seniors and their family members. Content analysis helped identify their eating behavior and the challenges they face.

Results

The majority of study participants were 75 years old or more (77%), while slightly more than half were 82 years old and over (54%). Participants described three specific aspects related to meals: the purchase of food, and the preparation and consumption of meals. Seniors often spoke about the move to a nursing home when discussing their diet.

Purchase of food

Seniors need some means of transport to purchase their food. Some overcame the lack of services by moving from one region to another. The majority depended heavily on their family or community for help with grocery shopping or meal preparation. As such, grocery shopping can be a daunting task for some seniors. To reduce costs and need for transportation, many mentioned planting a garden. Others bought fresh products in season and canned them to reduce costs.

Meal preparation

The majority of participants prepared their own meals. However, some were affected by a loss of motor skills. Therefore, they had to give up or delegate certain tasks, despite their love for cooking. Others modified their kitchen in order to perform their daily tasks. Meal preparation was enjoyed by some while others saw it as a chore. Some respondents wondered how long they could continue to do so.

Meal consumption

Seniors had little variety in their diet and they did not generally

follow the Canada Food Guide (CFG) recommendations. Of the 38 meals reported, only 9 met the CFG (23.6%) guidelines. The number of food portions and food quality was not always respected. Therefore, study participants appeared to be at risk of malnutrition. This data demonstrates the importance of educating seniors on food choices to ensure healthy aging. Home services such as Meals on Wheels can be a solution, but such services need to be available in the community and these meals need to be delivered hot.

Moving to a seniors' home was considered the last resort for the majority of participants because of the high cost of these institutions, the lack of freedom related to menu selection, and the poor quality of food in such facilities. Some were considering moving only when they no longer could feed themselves.

Conclusions

Seniors in this study seemed to have a poor diet. Lack of resources to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables throughout the year and unavailability of help with meal preparation, particularly for seniors living alone or the very old, were the main challenges faced when trying to preserve their autonomy at home.

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