From Dr. Escudé...

Nutrition in People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)

Healthy diets are associated with improving the quality and length of life in most people. The rates of obesity in people with IDD are typically higher than in others. Sometimes, genetic factors play a role in obesity, but often, eating a healthy diet can go a long way to maintaining a healthy weight and nutritional status.

Diet and Safety
Because some people with IDD have neuromuscular conditions that may be associated with swallowing difficulties, a diet that is safe for the person is extremely important. A change in texture of solid foods or thickness of liquids may be indicted to reduce the risk of choking and aspiration. For those on gastric tube feedings, when aspiration continues to occur, gastroesophageal reflux may be the cause. Observing for safe eating is a very important component to a healthy diet.

Medically Indicated Diets
Does a person have diabetes? Hypertension? Prader Willi syndrome? Chronic constipation? A healing skin wound? Obesity? These and other conditions should be considered when prescribing a healthy diet for a person. Making sure that a diet, at the least, does not make a medical condition worse should always be on our minds.

Diet and Health Promotion
A good diet can promote better health. Making sure that a person’s caloric needs are met, fluid requirements are accounted for, and fiber content is appropriate are a few things that can promote better health. Constipation is a common condition in people with IDD and ensuring adequate fiber and fluids can go a long way to promoting good bowel function. Prescribing healthy fruits and vegetables, limiting simple sugars, moderating fat intake, and minimizing alcohol are good general recommendations.

Weight
Monitoring a person’s weight on a regular basis can help to catch conditions before they get too far along. It’s easier to modify a diet to lose 5 pounds than to lose 50. Weight loss can be an early sign of multiple issues including
constipation, gastroesophageal reflux, swallowing difficulties, cancer, and neglect, to name a few.

**Sensory and Tactile Issues**
If a person only eats certain textures of food, dislikes getting their hands messy, overstuffs or pockets food frequently, gags at the sight, smell, touch or taste of foods (not white actually trying to eat) or excessively chews or mouths objects, a sensory or tactile issue should be considered. Various techniques can be utilized to help improve this situation. These include things like playing in a variety of sensory bins, using a vibrating toothbrush and building off textures that the person does like.

**Communication**
Could difficulty communicating food likes and dislikes be causing an issue with eating? Exploring different ways to help the person to be able to express their preferences may help to improve oral intake, if so.

**Environmental Considerations**
Looking at behavioral and environmental circumstances that can contribute to eating issues can be quite helpful. A person may not be eating because they are not allowed enough time to eat, they require assistance that they are not getting, they are intimidated by certain staff, or have a favorite support staff person that got transferred to a different job. Sometimes, a simple change in a person’s environment can improve their intake.

**Medications**
Medications have many side effects, some of which can affect eating. If someone is experiencing a side effect of nausea, they may not be able to express it verbally and so they just stop eating. Some sedating medications may make swallowing more difficult and dangerous. Constipating medications may interfere with someone’s appetite. Paying attention to medication side effects and the ways that they can interfere with eating is an important aspect to good dietary health, particularly during the first few weeks of adding a new drug or changing a dose of a current one.

**Sink Integrity**
Nutrition is an important factor in maintaining good skin integrity. Meeting a person’s caloric requirements, ensuring adequate protein intake, vitamins A, B2, C, D, calcium, zinc and copper have all been linked to skin health and healing. In addition to positioning and pressure relief, a thorough nutritional assessment can be a very important factor in wound healing and maintenance of healthy skin.
Thanks for your careful attention to helping improve the lives of people we support.

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Dr. Escudé has dedicated his career to providing healthcare for people with IDD and other vulnerable populations and teaches on the subject throughout the country.