

Oral nutritional interventions in frail older people who are malnourished or at risk of malnutrition: a systematic review

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Plain English summary

Oral nutritional supplements for frail older people

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Plain English summary

What was the question?

Malnutrition, in the form of undernutrition, is very common in frail older people. Dietary advice is recommended (e.g. adding nutrients to meals) for older adults who are malnourished, while powdered or liquid supplements (oral nutritional supplements) can be prescribed to those who are malnourished or at risk of becoming malnourished. In this study, we reviewed previous studies to see if oral nutritional supplements (as a form of dietary support) work at reducing malnutrition in frail older adults and whether or not they are value for money.

What did we do?

We searched for studies up to September 2021 on frail older people who were at risk of malnutrition or were malnourished in care homes, hospitals or the community in any country. We included studies that measured malnutrition and the consequences of malnutrition, quality of life, survival, costs and hospitalisations. We assessed the difference in malnutrition between those receiving oral nutritional supplements and those receiving usual care or other dietary (or nutritional) interventions. We also looked at the value for money of oral nutritional supplements.

What did we find?

We found 12 studies (11 studies looking at whether the supplements worked and one study looking at value for money). Most of which were of low quality, and many were funded by industry. Studies often did not report on longer-term effects, or how older people felt about the supplements. There was no clear or strong evidence that oral nutritional supplements worked or were value for money in reducing malnutrition or its consequences (such as the ability to perform everyday tasks).

What does this mean?

There is weak evidence for oral nutritional supplements in frail older adults. Future high-quality studies should be independent, assess longer-term effects, and have better reporting on factors that influence the impacts of oral nutritional supplements.

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This report

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