

# Eat cake to avoid malnutrition, GPs tell older patients

Chris Smyth Health Editor

More than a million older people have been told to eat more cakes and butter by doctors who say that fear of obesity is putting them at risk of wasting away through malnutrition.

People over 65 who have lost 5 per cent of their weight over a few months need to eat more cream and biscuits instead of assuming that such changes are normal signs of ageing, according to experts.

Loose rings and clothes could mean the person needs to eat more, according to the British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition (Bapen), an organisation for NHS staff to raise awareness of malnutrition.

Polling by Bapen found that 45 per cent of adults wrongly believe that it is normal to lose weight in later life.

The YouGov survey of 2,097 people also found that 40 per cent thought that foods such as cakes and biscuits that are high in calories should be avoided at all costs because of the risk of obesity, even in those who were underweight.

"For too long the public have been given health messages focused on reducing levels of obesity and while obesity is a huge problem, for the malnourished the best thing to do is ignore these messages entirely," Simon Gabe, Bapen's president, said.

"The general advice for those with malnutrition or for those at risk is to maximise their food intake. You can have cream in your coffee instead of milk, fry instead of grill meat and fish, add butter to your scrambled eggs, give that chicken an extra brush of oil before

putting it in the oven and stock up on cakes."

Bapen estimates that three million people in the UK are malnourished, 1.3 million of them over 65. The organisation says its advice is aimed at those who are underweight, defined as a body mass index of under 18.5, or who have lost at least 5 per cent of their weight within six months.

"Malnutrition is a hidden problem in the UK but awareness, prevention and detection are key to reducing its prevalence," Dr Gabe said. "With the number of people aged over 65 expected to rise by 50 per cent in the next 20 years, this problem is only going to get bigger. This approach could help to prevent thousands of people suffering the catastrophic health consequences of malnutrition and relieve significant pressure on the NHS and social care."

Dianne Jeffrey, chairwoman of the Malnutrition Task Force of older people's charities, said: "Malnutrition is often associated with the extreme poverty we see in the news, but the truth is that it can affect anyone, including our own family. It's important to be vigilant, so look out for the subtle tell-tell signs such as loose rings, dentures and clothes. Alarm bells should be ringing if we see the people we care about lose significant amounts of weight unintentionally in later life — it's not 'normal' to get thinner with age."

A third of older people admitted to hospital are on the verge of being malnourished, rising to half of those coming in from care homes. Hospital stays caused by malnutrition have doubled in the past decade.