

ABSTRACT

Background: Unintentional weight loss is a prevalent and costly clinical problem among nursing home (NH) residents. One of the most common nutrition interventions for residents at risk for weight loss is oral liquid nutrition supplementation. The purpose of this study was to determine the cost effectiveness of supplements relative to offering residents' snack foods and fluids between meals to increase caloric intake.

Methods: A controlled trial was conducted with 63 long-stay residents who had an order for nutrition supplementation. Participants were randomized into one of three groups: (1) usual NH care control; (2) supplement, or (3) between-meal snacks. For groups two and three, trained research staff provided supplements or snacks twice daily between meals, five days per week, for six weeks with assistance and encouragement to promote consumption. Research staff observed residents during and between meals for two days at baseline, weekly, and post six weeks to estimate total daily caloric intake. For both intervention groups, research staff documented residents' caloric intake between meals from supplements or snack items, refusal rates and the amount of staff time required to provide each intervention.

Results: Both interventions increased between meal caloric intake significantly relative to the control group and required more staff time than usual NH care. The snack intervention was less expensive and more effective than the supplement intervention.

Conclusions: Offering residents a choice among a variety of foods and fluids twice per day may be a more cost effective nutrition intervention than oral liquid nutrition supplementation.