

Supporting Nutritional Care and Access to Medical Foods

as part of an NHS
Fit for the Future



Our calls to action:

1

Malnutrition screening: Identifying malnutrition risk must be embedded in a neighbourhood NHS model, through incentives that support the use of screening tools in primary and community care.

2

Dedicated national champion and accountability: It's time for nutritional care to be prioritised in national policy through dedicated leadership and strategic accountability within the Department of Health and Social Care – for example, a national clinical director.

Malnutrition affects over 3 million people in the UK and costs the NHS £22.6 billion annually, with costs projected to rise by £4 billion by 2035.¹

Treating someone with malnutrition costs the health and care system up to three times more than treating someone who is not malnourished. The potential benefits of tackling malnutrition are huge, both for patients and for the health and care system.

During this UK Malnutrition Awareness Week, we are asking for your support to raise awareness and support increased prioritisation of nutritional care.

What is malnutrition?

Malnutrition is a serious condition where individuals lack essential nutrients, leading to weight and muscle loss. Malnutrition can arise for a number of reasons, including:



Disease-Related Malnutrition (DRM): Often linked to long-term conditions such as cancer, kidney disease, gastrointestinal and neurological disorders. A 2021 BAPEN survey found prevalence highest in gastrointestinal conditions (48%), respiratory (45%), cancer (45%) and neurological diseases (44%).²



Frailty: Around 10% of people over 65 live with frailty, rising to 25–50% in those over 85 – putting them at increased risk of malnutrition.³

What are medical foods and why are they important in supporting better health outcomes?

People facing heightened risks of malnutrition can often benefit from nutritional care, including screening for malnutrition and the development of individual nutrition plans.

Medical foods are specialised foods designed to meet the nutritional needs of patients who cannot receive adequate nutritional intake by normal foods alone due to a disease, disorder or medical condition. Medical foods include oral nutritional supplements (ONS), enteral tube feeds, metabolic products and thickeners.

Nutritional care has been shown to deliver:



67%

reduction in hospital stays⁴



30%

reduction in hospital readmissions⁴



25%

lower usage of GP visits⁴



39%

reduction in antibiotic prescribing⁴

The case for prioritising access to nutritional care in national policy

The number of people at heightened risk of malnutrition is set to rise. **People aged over-65 now make up 18% of the UK population, with predictions that this will increase to 32% by 2043.**⁵ The number of people living with long-term conditions, such as cancer, diabetes and kidney disease is also growing, with estimates suggesting that **9.1 million people will live with a major illness by 2040.**⁶

Nutritional care is slipping through the cracks. It's an issue that has relevance across the whole health and care system, including in cancer care, neurology and social care. However, nutritional care has no dedicated national leadership or accountability, and access to malnutrition screening tools remains varied across the NHS.



Health inequality:

Variation in the use of malnutrition screening tools, which can mean those at risk of malnutrition are not detected early enough.



Gaps in healthcare:

Missed opportunities to embed nutritional care in primary care and on admission to hospital – where individuals may benefit from nutritional interventions.



Lack of understanding:

Ongoing challenges in relation to awareness of nutritional risk and identification of malnutrition.

How can you support nutritional care?

Work with us to increase awareness of the importance of good nutritional care and ensure the government prioritises malnutrition under the 10 Year Health Plan:



PQs: Table parliamentary questions about access to medical foods in your constituency and the steps the government is taking to support malnutrition screening in community, primary and secondary care services.



Parliamentary debate: Support the tabling of a Parliamentary debate to raise awareness of the importance of nutritional care for people living with many different medical conditions.



Local Engagement: Ask if the hospitals in your constituency are screening patients for malnutrition on admission.



Education: Raise awareness among your constituents about the impact of malnutrition through social media and the local press.

¹ BAPEN (November 2025). *Introduction to Malnutrition*:
<https://www.bapen.org.uk/malnutrition/introduction-to-malnutrition/?showall=&start=4>

² BAPEN (October 2021). *Survey of Malnutrition and Nutritional Care in Adults*:
<https://www.bapen.org.uk/pdfs/reports/mag/survey-of-malnutrition-and-nutritional-care-in-adults-2021.pdf>

³ Age UK (July 2021). *What is Frailty?*: <https://www.bgs.org.uk/introduction-to-frailty>

⁴ Future Health (October 2025). *Hiding in plain sight: Tackling malnutrition as part of the prevention agenda*:
<https://www.futurehealth-research.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Hiding-in-plain-sight-Web-FINAL-Nov-2023.pdf>

⁵ Age UK (July 2023). *Care of Older People in England 2023*:
https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/health--wellbeing/age_uk_briefing_state_of_health_and_care_of_older_people_july2023.pdf

⁶ The Health Foundation (July 2023). *Health in 2040: projected patterns of illness in England*: <https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/reports/health-in-2040-projected-patterns-of-illness-in-england>