

# Ward Volunteer Skills

# 1



## Helping at Mealtimes

**PART OF THE 'FIRST 33  
HOURS' PROGRAMME FOR  
NEW VOLUNTEERS AT  
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY  
HOSPITAL.**

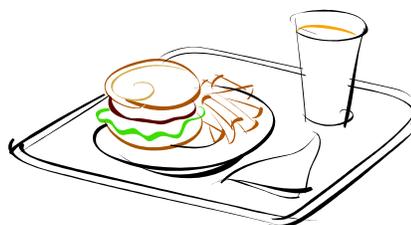
Written for CUH Volunteers by  
Anna Ellis



## Skills for New Ward Volunteers

### HELPING AT MEALTIMES

**O**ur ward volunteer roles are centred around lunchtimes or the evening meal. The main, hot meal of the day is served at lunchtime. Sandwiches are served at the evening meal, although hot food is also available in the evening. Ward volunteers play a significant role in helping to ensure our patients eat and drink. This skills builder explains just why that's important and how you, as a ward volunteer, can really make a difference for our patients at mealtimes.



Your role in supporting the patient to eat and drink is to:

- **Complement** the ward staff to ensure all patients are supported to eat and drink.
- **Assist** patients who need minimal support with eating and drinking, opening packets, cutting up food, making sure it is in within easy reach etc.
- **Provide** patients with company as they eat and drink.
- **Encourage** patients to eat and drink.

You are a member of the ward team, along with the nurses, doctors, therapists, dietitians, and housekeepers. It is all our responsibility to encourage patients to eat and drink – but volunteers can be especially talented at this!

It's important that you understand **why** this is so important.

## DANGERS OF MALNUTRITION

Patients who are malnourished may have:-

- An increased risk of infection.
- Wounds that do not heal well.
- Skin problems and pressure sores.
- Muscle weakness, poor coordination and mobility problems.
- Cardiac problems.
- Apathy, confusion and memory loss.

## WHY ARE THE ELDERLY MOST AT RISK?

- Depression.
- Poor or no teeth/poor oral hygiene.
- Inability to hold cutlery.
- Communication barriers.
- Long hospital stay.
- Swallowing difficulties.
- Missed meals.
- Reduced appetite due to illness/medications.
- Increased nutritional needs due to illness.
- Unfamiliar food.

Of course, many older people are active, fit and well; but this group are still at risk when they come into hospital. Some 35-40% of older people are **already malnourished** before they are admitted. These people are at **greatest risk**.

## THE HOSPITAL SYSTEM AND ROUTINE

The wards all have slightly different routines, so you need to get to know your placement area. Breakfast is served from 7.00am, lunch from 12.00 noon and the evening meal from 5.00pm.

### Red trays.

Patients who need help to eat and drink are assessed by the nursing staff and given red trays and red beakers to highlight their needs. Look out for these on the wards. Patients who have a red tray at mealtimes will need help from the nursing staff to ensure they are able to eat their meals. Volunteers may not feed patients, but they can cut up food, change cutlery and (provided the patient does not have

swallowing difficulties) support the patient to feed themselves. Volunteers should always be guided and supervised by staff, who know the patients' needs.

### **Traffic light board**

On the wall behind each patient bed space is a traffic light board. It should be updated daily by the nursing staff and will indicate the following:

**Red: NBM** - Nil by mouth – the patient may not eat or drink. They will be either waiting for treatment or may be receiving nutrition and hydration through feeding tubes and other medical equipment.

**Amber:** Caution: Needs help, or supplements, or special diet, or thickened fluids (will be specified)

**Green:** Go Ahead – normal diet, no restrictions.

### **Menu Booklets**

Each patient will choose their meal from a menu booklet. There are four booklets.

- Medicine for the elderly (yellow cover)
- Coronary care, eating for a healthy heart (red cover)
- General wards (green cover)
- Special diet menu (blue cover)

Copies of the menu booklet for your ward will be found in the kitchen area – just ask the housekeep if you can't find one. It is useful for you to familiarise yourself with the contents of the menu booklet used in your placement area.

## **HOW VOLUNTEERS CAN HELP**

Volunteers can help create a positive atmosphere in the ward at mealtimes – the ambiance is very important.

There are *practical* things you can do to help, these are:-

- Give out hand wipes, open them and show patients how to use them. Encourage patients who can mobilise to wash their hands.
- Clear bed side table.
- Always wash your hands and put on a green plastic apron before serving meals.



## VOLUNTEER SKILLS BUILDER

- Handing out the meals, alongside housekeeping and nursing staff. Ensure the food is within reach, that cutlery is available – try to make it a service so that people want to eat, don't just plonk the tray down and walk away!
- Open packets, cut up food if the patient is struggling and consents to your help.
- Offer alternatives.
- Get missed meals for patients as required.

There are also *attitudes* and *approaches* that are helpful. These are:-

- Show an interest in a patient's appetite, notice whether he/she is eating or not. Encourage, encourage, encourage!
- Be confident in your knowledge of basic nutritional needs, so that you understand the importance of nutrition and can answer basic questions. You're not expected to be an expert, just to have an interest and basic understanding.
- Understand the system and routine and know what's available for patients.

## WHAT TO DO IF...

### **You suspect a patient is choking.**

- Stay with the patient and raise the alarm – call a member of staff or pull the emergency bell.
- Reassure the patient.
- Keep calm.
- Provide privacy.
- Give a report to the attending staff about what happened.
- DO NOT attempt emergency treatment this is the responsibility of the nursing and medical staff.

### **The patient is Nil by Mouth.**

- Offer emotional support – be prepared to spend time with the patient if necessary.
- Acknowledge that mealtimes are difficult for patients not able to eat. Listen to a patient's anxiety if they are awaiting a procedure.