



Access to food, fluids and nutrition care for people with disability during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) is the national association of the dietetic profession with over 7000 members, and branches in each state and territory. DAA is a leader in nutrition and advocates for food and nutrition for healthier people and healthier nations.

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DAA is concerned about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on access to food, fluids and nutrition care for people with disability. DAA supports access to Accredited Practising Dietitian services during the current pandemic, in line with national guidelines to ensure safe practice and reduce risk of infection. DAA also supports efforts to ensure equitable access to food, fluids and nutrition care for all people with disability during the COVID19 pandemic.

Following is a list of recommendations to address food and nutrition issues, to ensure the health and wellbeing of people with disability during the current pandemic.

Access to food, fluids and nutrition

- Ensure that all people with disability have equal access to appropriate food, fluids and nutrition supports. Some people with disability have little or no family or friendship supports, or access to professional support may be disrupted due to the current pandemic. The government must play a role in identifying these vulnerable individuals and ensuring that appropriate supports are available throughout the pandemic
- Some major supermarkets have implemented measures to ensure access to food fluids and nutrition care for people with disability.
 - NDIS participants were granted priority access to supermarket home delivery services, to purchase groceries online. However, not all people with disability are NDIS participants. Supermarkets should find other ways to ensure that all vulnerable members of society have priority access to delivery services.
 - Where possible, all supermarkets should provide dedicated shopping hours for people with disability and other vulnerable members of society
 - Emergency relief food packages provided for people with disability, or other vulnerable members of society, should consider the cultural requirements of recipients, food safety and the nutritional attributes of foods.
- Hoarding of food and beverages disrupts the supply of essential food items. Whilst supermarkets have implemented measures to address this, strategies should be put in place to minimise the chance of this occurring again in the future.
- Emergency relief packages should be provided in all States and Territories for people with disability who are self-isolating or who have physical or financial limitations that prevent them from accessing food, fluids or nutrition supplies. Emergency food relief should consider cultural requirements, food safety and nutrition.
- Support should be provided to charity organisations that provide emergency relief and food and nutrition supports to the community
- Government should address supply issues impacting supply of nutrition supports.
 - Our members have reported significant phone hold times when calling distributors of oral nutrition supplements (ONS), such as Brightsky, and significant delays of up to 3 weeks for

delivery of ONS. This presents an unacceptable risk to people who rely on ONS as a main or sole source of nutrition.

- It is reported that Nutricia has requested spare pumps to be returned as they may be needed in the community.
- Measures should be put in place to address these issues now and to secure supply of these essential supports in the future.

Access to nutrition supports and services

- Provide funding and support for people with disability to access technology and telehealth services, including people without NDIS funding. Currently, many people with disability do not have access to a computer or smart phone and may have varying capacity to utilise technology.
- Telehealth services may take longer and be less efficient than face-to-face services, particularly for people with cognitive disability and mental health issues. Measures should be implemented to ensure equity of access for people with disability, who would benefit from different modes of service delivery.
- Dietitians and other service providers may need support, through education or funding, to provide telehealth services. There is also a need for appropriate, safe and reliable infrastructure to host these services.

Workforce and financial concerns of dietitians

- Like many Australians, dietitians are experiencing financial hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Our members report a drop in bookings, increased cancellations and challenges with transitioning to the use of telehealth technology. Efforts are needed to support the dietetics workforce, to ensure continuity of nutrition care for people with disability.
- Further, with children at home indefinitely, many dietitians are reducing their working hours, which introduces further financial stress.
- Measures are needed to ensure that dietitians and other allied health workers are financially supported.