Benefits of Social Eating

The social aspects of meal times have been identified as an integral part of the eating process. Eating as a social activity is a way of connecting and interacting with other people.

Social isolation, which is the lived experience of many older people, is identified as a factor that interferes with their ability to eat well.

Individuals may lose interest in preparing or eating regular meals alone.

The social experience around meal times makes a big difference to appetites.

*Australian Ageing Agenda, Food Service – the Social Side of Mealtimes. Nov/Dec 2008*

For Further Information Contact

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Eating With Friends is about:

- bringing people together for a nutritious meal and making new friends
- reducing social isolation and improving wellbeing by creating regular opportunities for social connection
- working with communities and volunteer groups to organise and run regular group meals
- having fun and conversations

History

The first Eating With Friends (EWF) group started in 2000. A group of community workers and volunteers looked at ways to bring socially isolated older people together to share a meal and to enjoy the company of others.

A lunch group was set up and proved very popular!

That original group still operates, with a total of 35 EWF groups now operating around the state.
Research

Research conducted by the University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) UTAS in 2007 explored challenges facing older rural people in staying socially connected.

The study looked at the current social eating models, including EWF groups, and the results show there are benefits to getting people together to share meals in a social setting.

Research participants drew a distinction between food and eating. Food is food, whereas eating involves others - it implies company and some sort of social interaction.

They clearly identified that eating with others was much more enjoyable than eating alone, and EWF provided them with invaluable social interaction and, almost as an aside, the group also happened to provide a meal. It was the access to other people and the anticipation of time shared that enhanced the eating experience.

The research indicates that any meal program needs to recognise the social aspect of meals as essential – which is what Eating With Friends does!

(Healthy Eating for Healthy Ageing in Rural Tasmania: Final Report, June 2007, Launceston, Dept of Rural Health, UTAS)

EWF in an aged care setting

Huon Regional Care

Huon Regional Care (HRC) is an aged care residential facility located in Franklin in southern Tasmania. They started an EWF group in 2012 as a way to outreach into their local community. The group still operates and is a collaboration between their Home Care program, Lifestyle and Leisure department, kitchen staff, management and volunteers.

Twenty participants attended their first lunch, with 7 being residents from the facility, 3 from community care, and 10 from SETAC (South Eastern Tasmanian Aboriginal Corporation) in Cygnet. SETAC members came to visit their elders in residential care and now see it as a wonderful way to stay in touch on a regular basis.

Numbers currently average 40 each month, including family and friends of residents who come to share in the social occasion. Music and dancing follow every EWF lunch and is much enjoyed by all.

The regular lunches have proven popular with the community and HRC has expanded the social eating program to their other residential facility in Dover.

One Dover facility resident says he likes to invite his friends to EWF as a way ‘to say thanks’ for their ongoing visits and support. As he finds getting out very difficult this is a way to enjoy a meal and ‘normal’ activities with his friends.

Models of EWF Groups

The 3 models outlined below are a guide to how EWF groups operate. There is no fixed format, just guiding principles, as each group is encouraged to address the needs in their own community and utilise their local resources. Groups operate on a cost-recovery basis.

♦ Community Based Model/Eating In:
Community groups and/or volunteers organise and host a meal at a local community venue

♦ Eating Out Model:
Groups visit cafes and restaurants, or volunteers host a meal at a local community venue

♦ School Model:
Students organise and host a meal at a school or community venue

“One of the delights of life is eating with friends, second to that is talking about eating. And, for an unsurpassed double whammy, there is talking about eating while you are eating with friends.”

Laurie Colwin Home Cooking: A Writer in the Kitchen Harper Collins 1987