

Elderly urged to drink more water

Health campaigners have called for government action to help ensure that elderly people in care across the UK get enough water.

Baroness Greengross, founder of the charity Action on Elder Abuse, says failure to provide enough water to drink could be seen as neglect.

The baroness has urged ministers to look at a scheme to encourage drinking at a care home in Suffolk.

She also wants a set of minimum standards on hydration across the UK.

Baroness Greengross said there had been a lot of attention on the effects of malnutrition on elderly people in hospitals and in care.

But she said that the impact of dehydration was often overlooked.

It makes frail people more vulnerable to infections, dizziness, confusion, and to falls, from which many never fully recover.

The baroness cites the scheme at The Martins care home in Bury St Edmunds, where residents are being encouraged to drink eight to 10 glasses of water a day, and the number of falls there has dropped sharply.

The Suffolk scheme has drawn a lot of interest from other care providers.

There is some guidance on this issue in place across the UK, though in England and Wales the governments say they are looking to produce stronger standards.

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How care home keeps elderly healthy

By Jane Hughes
Health correspondent, BBC News

A year ago, 88-year-old Jean Lavender used to find walking any distance a struggle.

Now she is keen to get outside for a walk most days.

And she puts the transformation down to the most simple of medicines - water.

She is one of a group of residents at a care home in Suffolk who have been encouraged to increase their intake of water.

And they have all reported dramatic results.

Jean says she feels 20 years younger.

"I feel more alert - more cheerful too. I'm not a miserable person, but it's added a sort of zest."

Staff at The Martins care home in Bury St Edmunds started a "water club" for their residents last summer.

Residents were encouraged to drink eight to 10 glasses of water a day, water coolers were installed, and they were each given a jug for their room.

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The views of some residents after drinking more water

They report significant improvements in health as a result - many fewer falls, fewer GP call-outs, a cut in the use of laxatives and in urinary infections, better quality of sleep, and lower rates of agitation among residents with dementia.

Dehydration

Doctors have long highlighted the risks of dehydration for elderly people. It can cause dizziness and potentially serious falls, constipation, and confusion.

The whole home buzzes now; there isn't that period after lunch when everyone goes off to sleep

Wendy Tomlinson

While most people's systems can adjust to insufficient water, frail old people are far less equipped to cope.

So when Wendy Tomlinson, a former nurse, took over the management of the charity-run home, she suspected that drinking more water might help the residents feel better.

Even she has been surprised by how much difference it's made, though.

"It's been fantastic," she said. "The whole home buzzes now; there isn't that period after lunch when everyone goes off to sleep."

For Baroness Greengross, a cross-bench peer, it reinforces a conviction she has had for some time now - that many old people simply are not drinking enough, and it is harming their health.

She wants to see tougher regulations in care homes across the UK, so that staff have to make sure residents drink enough.

"We hear a great deal about malnutrition among old people," she says.

"But we forget about the need for them to have enough water. It shouldn't be very difficult to change the habits of care staff."

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