

Defining Dining... It's About Me

2010 National Residents' Rights Week: October 3-9, 2010

By Sarah Wells, Executive Director
The National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care (formerly NCCNHR)

Dining is such an integral, systemic function of our lives that, oftentimes, we may forget how lucky we are to enjoy or share a delicious meal. Many of us are accustomed to eating at any time of the day we desire, with the flexibility of choosing to drive to a five-star restaurant or simply to the grocery store to cook our own meals at home. Often we take these simple everyday pleasures for granted. American culture is based largely on socializing with others during meals, and we expect these meals to look and taste good! For me, dining with family and friends is a favorite activity. While I am not a great cook myself, I am the beneficiary of my husband's and mother's kitchen magic!

Residents' Rights Week 2010 reminds us that long-term care residents deserve the same high-quality dining experience to which the rest of us have access. Individual residents in nursing homes, assisted living, and board and care facilities should have the ability to voice their opinions and be heard when choosing what they eat, when they eat, and the atmosphere in which they dine. The dining experience should be a fun celebration of food, friends, culture and life without invoking a sense of dining in an unfriendly, detached institution.

Residents should be given choices about the kinds of food they eat. This can include having a variety of nutritious and culturally diverse meals prepared throughout the week, as well as meals catered towards vegetarians. It is important to prepare food that residents actually want to eat. Not only should food be tasty and well prepared, but it should be visually appealing as well. Tasty and nutritious foods that appeal to a resident's sense of sight as well as taste take into account the full dining needs of our long-term care residents.

If residents are forced to eat only at certain times of the day, they may consume food even when they are not hungry – or worse, they will skip meals and not have food available when hunger does set in. Flexible meal times – including an expanded time frame for each meal – are necessary to allow residents to eat when they want. It is imperative that food is available to residents throughout the day, and an option to do this is to offer a canteen within the facility. Another option is to offer room service to residents. Long-term care residents, especially those who sleep during the day and are awake in the evenings and at night, can enjoy the convenience of requesting food to be sent to their room when they feel hungry.

Another area that can benefit from improvement is the way in which food is being served. While many facilities utilize buffet-style and restaurant-style dining for their main meals, more facilities can introduce open access to food in addition to these more established serving styles. Residents may crave snacks when meals are not being served, and this option should be made available to them.

Allowing residents to eat together in a common dining room also enhances the dining experience, and fosters a home-like, friendly atmosphere. This environment should ideally be a well-lit, open area where residents are encouraged to interact with each other. Facilities should also aim to create self-contained living areas for their residents, with each area equipped with a kitchen and dining room. The goal is to permit residents to feel welcome, invited, and safe while enjoying good food and company.

This year's Residents' Rights Week theme *Defining Dining...It's About Me* challenges us to think of creative ways to implement an exceptional dining experience for our long-term care residents during the week of October 3 – 9, 2010 and throughout the year. If mealtimes are the only event during the day that residents look forward to, which is often the case, then we should strive to give them the best dining experience possible.

As we enter Residents' Rights Week in October and start thinking about the holiday season – of which an entire day is dedicated to eating deliciously prepared Thanksgiving foods with our loved ones – let's work together to make 2010 the year to provide our long-term care residents with the tastiest food, comfortable dining environments, and flexible options for mealtimes.