

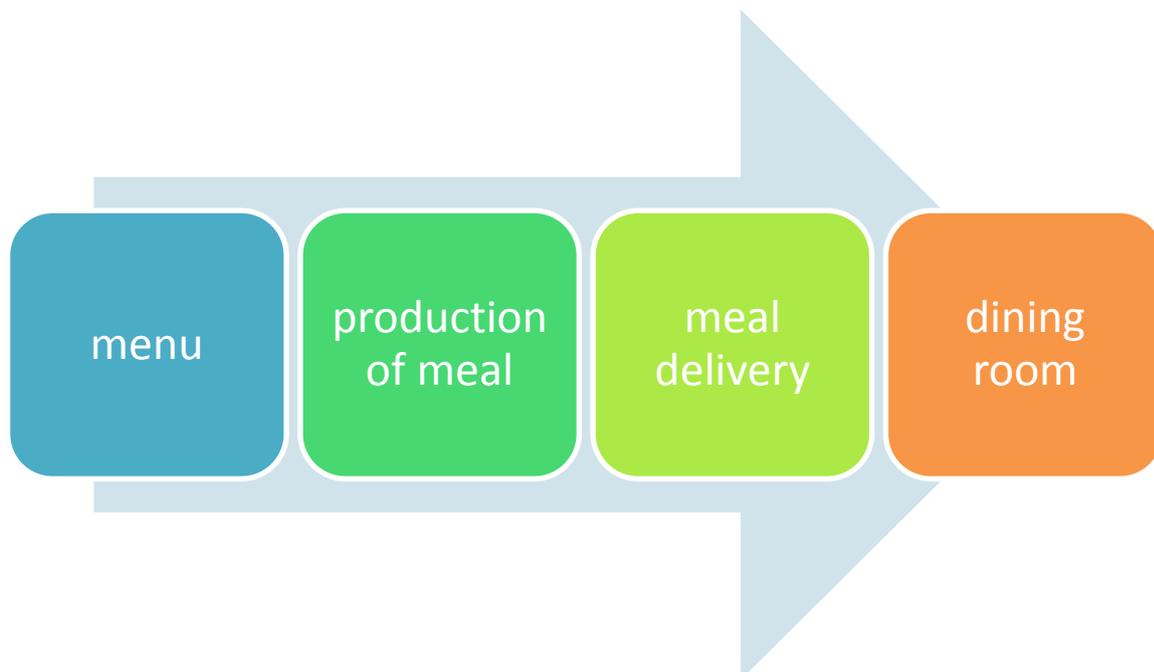
# CATERING IN AGED CARE

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Catering for residents in an aged care facility is a complex process whereby food must be transformed into meals that the residents enjoy and want to eat.

Catering is one of the most important functions in aged care. Human beings are food driven and each day catering services across the nation strive to achieve the perfect meal where residents are satisfied with the quality and have enjoyed the dining experience. This is by no means an easy task. To look after every resident and get it right day after day takes a lot of planning and organisation. The perfect meal situation does not depend solely on the food being well cooked and presented. It also depends on how the food is produced, how the food is delivered to the resident's through the meal delivery system, and finally to the dining room where all the hard work comes together. Each stage along the catering pathway is crucial to ensure its success and that residents enjoy their meal.

The following diagram outlines the pathway in which food goes from its purchase to the consumption by residents.



Aged care facilities all walk a very similar path

## Menu

Menus define how catering systems are set up and how the menu can be limited by the catering equipment. Kitchen design needs to be carefully planned to maximise production opportunities that will ensure that menu has a freshness which allow residents the flexibility of choice and variety. Part of the development of menus is gathering food preferences from resident and understanding the typed of food resident like to eat.

## Production

Production is the process whereby food is transformed into a meal. Production can be essentially divided between two main systems., 'fresh cook' and 'cook chill' . Data collected from the National Menu Survey for Residential Aged Care, conducted by the University of Queensland, suggest that aged care facilities across Australia are predominately 'fresh cook'. Cooking fresh is having food cooked on the day it is served which means that facilities have kitchens operating seven days a week. There is some variation on the 'fresh cook' theme where facilities do use some 'cook chill' technology, so that they can re-thermalise food over weekend periods and reduce their labour cost. These facilities can also produce batches of products like porridge, soups and gravies only a few times a week and hence free uptime to concentrate on other areas of catering.

'Cook chill' is the process whereby food is produced and rapidly chilled thus enabling an increased shelf-life of anywhere between five to twenty eight days. One of the advantages of 'cook chill' is that it reduces the operational times of a kitchen. The difference between food services in a 'cook fresh' and 'cook chill' kitchen depends on the type of service you are marketing for your organisation. There is little to suggest a significant nutritional differences between the systems, and in aged care the focus of food production should be a deliver a meal which the residents like and will eat.

## Food delivery

No matter how food is produced - whether in a centralised off-site kitchen or on the premises - one of the key areas of food services is moving the food to residents. Again the National Menu Survey indicated that facilities use a wide variety of methods to do this., from kitchen that served straight to a dining room, smaller kitchens where food is delivered and kept warm to be served into dining rooms, kitchens which received bulk foods that require reheating to serve to be dining room, and finally tray meal services in which food is pre-plated and then heated in carts adjacent to dining rooms or thermally supported an delivered to resident areas.

In aged care the preferred model is to serve foods into a dining area form an adjacent kitchen or kitchenette. It does not matter if the food is being cooked and hot held, delivered and hot held, or re-thermalised, as either of these systems allows the smell fo the food to permeate though the dining are. One of the primary functions to stimulate the appetite is the smell of food so meal delivery systems need thus function

so that at meal times residents have the opportunity smell the food they are about to consume, Using trays and heating tray carts reduces this effect and hence also reduces a resident ability to change their mind about their food choice. Another important point with plated meal delivery systems is to ensure that they keep the food warm and have the ability to hot hold if required. This is especially important when residents require assistance to feed and meals are left on the tray waiting for care staff to provide assistance. In these incidences the meal support requires a thermal dome or base, or a heated base and cover.

## Dining room service

When it comes to dining rooms this is the place in the catering pathway which is the maker or breaker. The dining room is where the most important function occur, when all the hard work in producing a meal getting that meal to the resident hot and looking spectacular is put in the test. Dining room need to be set up so that the resident feels at home, that they focus on the meal and feel comfortable. A dining room needs to be a nice welcoming space.

Below is a list of areas which need to be considered for a dining room

The set up - no clutter and plenty of space to move around

Appropriate furniture

Table settings

Background music

Lighting

Resident and staff interaction

Enough seats for staff to sit down and assist residents

Minimum disruption to residents from medication trolley or visiting health professionals.

The other important function of the dining room is to ensure that residents are social and not being isolated by eating in their room. There will be times which a resident will need to stay in their room for meals due to clinical reasons. However the dining room is a social place where resident can interact with staff and visitor's having resident in the dining room helps to reduce social and keeps resident engaged. Dining rooms also allow staff to monitor what residents are eating which is essential to prevent unintentional weight loss. As the population gets more frail it is important to ensure residents eat adequate amount so food daily.

How do you know if your catering system is functioning well? Firstly, as food is such a hot topic for residents, the amount of complaints, complement and food back from resident meeting is a good guide. Another measure is the use of food service resident satisfaction survey .Tools such as these ask the resident to rate the quality of the food, service form staff, dining room and menu.

Catering for residents is not simple. It is a complex process where food is transformed into meals that our residents enjoy and want to eat. There is no perfect system and it

is amazing what you can do to really enhance the meal experience by changing simple things. But one important fact is that if any part of the catering pathway is not functioning well then this can seriously compromise catering to residents.

What we are looking at catering in aged care to ensure meals are enjoyed, eaten and resident looking forward to the next meal time.

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