14.1: Nutrition Introduction

Learning Objectives

- Describe variables that influence nutrition
- Identify factors related to nutrition across the life span
- Assess a patient’s nutritional status
- Outline specific nursing interventions to promote nutrition
- Base your decisions on the action of nutrients, signs of excess and deficiency, and specific foods associated with each nutrient
- Base your decisions on the interpretation of diagnostic tests and lab values indicative of a disturbance in nutrition
- Give examples of appropriate vitamin use across the life span
- Identify evidence-based practices related to nutrition

Nurses promote healthy nutrition to prevent disease, assist patients to recover from illness and surgery, and teach patients how to optimally manage chronic illness with healthy food choices. Healthy nutrition helps to prevent obesity and chronic diseases, such as diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular disease. By proactively encouraging healthy eating habits, nurses provide the tools for patients to maintain their health, knowing it is easier to stay healthy than to become healthy after disease sets in. When patients are recovering from illness or surgery, nurses use strategies to promote good nutrition even when a patient has a poor appetite or nausea. If a patient develops chronic disease, the nurse provides education about prescribed diets that can help manage the disease, such as a low carbohydrate diet for patients with diabetes or a low fat, low salt, low cholesterol diet for patients with cardiovascular disease.

Nurses also advocate for patients with conditions that can cause nutritional deficits. For example, a nurse may be the first to notice that a patient is having difficulty swallowing at mealtime and advocates for a swallow study to prevent
aspiration. A nurse may also notice other psychosocial risk factors that place a patient at risk for poor nutrition in their home environment and make appropriate referrals to enhance their nutritional status. Nurses also administer alternative forms of nutrition, such as enteral (tube) feedings or parenteral (intravenous) feedings.

This chapter will review basic information about the digestive system, essential nutrients, nutritional guidelines, and then discuss the application of the nursing process to addressing patients’ nutritional status.