



# Nutritional Considerations in Geriatric Orthopedics

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## Abstract

**Purpose of Review** Malnourished patients are at risk for fragility fractures resulting in postoperative complications, increased mortality, and decreased functional status after geriatric orthopedic surgeries. Nutritional status of the older patient can be determined by various screening tools. We aim to review recent literature on nutritional status in preoperative and postoperative evaluations and determine its implications for geriatric orthopedic surgery patients.

**Recent Findings** Malnutrition has been associated with increased orthopedic surgery complications. An individualized nutrition screening and treatment plan can reduce these complications and prevent future fragility fractures. Interleukin-6 is an inflammatory cytokine that may be useful in the prediction of mortality and nutritional status of the patient; however, further research is necessary.

**Summary** A nutritional screening tool can be utilized to determine at-risk individuals. Nutrition should be optimized prior to undergoing an orthopedic procedure, and an interdisciplinary team approach is recommended.

**Keywords** Orthopedic nutrition · Geriatric nutrition · Malnutrition · Fragility fracture · Preoperative · Postoperative

## Introduction

By 2050, there will be approximately 83.7 million Americans aged 65 and over [1]. As the population ages in the USA, the prevalence of fractures in older people continues to climb. Fragility fractures as a result of aging and osteoporosis are projected to account for over 3 million fractures per year by 2025 [2]. For patient who sustains hip fractures, only half of patients recover to their pre-fracture level of independence for activities of daily living [3]. One factor affecting not only the rate of fractures but the outcomes associated with fractures and the subsequent healthcare burden is the nutritional status of the older patient. It has been reported that 3.2% of all hospitalized patients annually are considered malnourished [4, 5]. The geriatric population specifically is at the greatest risk of malnourishment. While less than 5% of community dwellers are malnourished, approximately 30% of residents in long term and rehabilitation institutions are considered

malnourished [6]. Additionally, 58.3% of acutely hospitalized patients over age 65 are considered malnourished [5]. The association between the physical function status of the older adult as it pertains to their ability to perform basic self-care and nutritional status has been found to be significant [7–10]. It is not difficult to extrapolate how nutritional status of the geriatric orthopedic patient can impact outcomes including complication rates, length of hospital stay, and overall mortality rates. We sought to examine recent literature for current information on the impact of nutrition on orthopedic care and advances being made in screening and treatment for malnutrition in the geriatric orthopedic patient population.

## History and Advances in Markers of Nutrition

Malnourished patients are often identified with the use of a screening tool. Multiple governing bodies have attempted to provide consensus-based criteria for screening of malnutrition, including the European Society for Clinical Nutrition and Metabolism and the American Society for Enteral and Parental Nutrition. Commonly utilized variables within these screening tools include evaluation for reduction of food intake, body mass index, and weight loss during a defined period of time [11]. The Mini Nutritional Assessment is a more

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sensitive tool compared to the screening tools that are designed specifically for an older population [12]. Rubenstein et al. demonstrated that the Mini Nutritional Assessment had the best specificity in identifying those patients at risk for malnutrition [13]. While screening and risk assessment is an initial step, it is imperative to look at factors that drive malnutrition once at-risk patients are identified. Favaro-Moreira et al. identified a range of risk factors for malnutrition including polypharmacy, oral dysphagia, needing assistance to eat, constipation, loss of grip strength, dementia, and frailty as defined by deterioration of body function [14]. There is a plethora of objective data measures to assess nutritional risk in a patient. Historically albumin, prealbumin, transferrin, and CRP have been utilized as laboratory markers for nutritional status [15]. Bohl et al. examined the effect an albumin level < 3.5 g/dL had on survival after geriatric hip fractures. They demonstrated that geriatric patients undergoing surgery for a hip fracture with documented hypoalbuminemia had higher rates of death, sepsis, unplanned intubation, and increased mean length of stay compared to a retrospective cohort of geriatric patients with albumin levels > 3.5 g/dL [16]. It should be noted that while each of the biological nutrition markers paint a global picture, there are inherent flaws in each substrate. Albumin has a long half-life, thus rendering it less useful for acute changes. Additionally, transferrin is dependent on the iron status of the patient [17].

Other nutritional markers have been assessed to try to better identify at-risk populations. Interleukin-6 (IL-6) is an inflammatory cytokine known to be elevated in trauma patients [18]. Qiao et al. even demonstrate in a meta-analysis that IL-6 can be used to predict mortality in trauma patients [19]. IL-6 can also be used to evaluate the nutritional status of a patient. Bian et al. demonstrated that sarcopenia, or loss of muscle mass, in the elderly correlated with elevated IL-6 and TNF-alpha [20].

The primary role of circulating IL-6 is to maintain energy status in skeletal muscle. However, a sustained elevation of IL-6, in the absence of adequate nutrient supplementation which is required to offset the effects of IL-6, has been shown to accelerate muscle degradation [21]. The malnourished, sarcopenic, geriatric population essentially lives in a chronic state of heightened inflammation. A cohort with median follow-up of 11 years demonstrated that an elevated baseline level of IL-6 was associated with higher incidence of hip fractures in women and older patients [22]. Saribal et al. evaluated IL-6 and tumor necrosis factor-alpha levels in geriatric hip fractures and matched the fracture cohort with uninjured controls. IL-6 was shown to significantly spike higher from baseline postoperative day 1 and 2 [23]. Given the acute increase in IL-6 known to occur during trauma, Kaiser et al. examined the impact this has on fracture healing. They discovered that inhibition of a specific sub-molecule of IL-6 called IL-6-trans actually enhanced bony healing in the fracture gap. This suggested that IL-6 facilitated negative effects on bone repair [24,

25]. The study was limited by the fact that global inhibition of all IL-6 sub-molecules did not impact effectiveness of bony healing. IL-6 is becoming an important molecule for not only prediction of hip fracture risk but the subsequent healing potential given chronic elevation of IL-6 in the geriatric population as described above. Measuring serum IL-6 levels has seen theoretical advancements with decrease in result times to within 24 min compared to 4 to 5 h [26]. IL-6 is not yet approved for use. While there is some evidence that tocilizumab in rheumatoid arthritis patients leads to increased bone mineral density through IL-6 modulation, thus far there are no clear therapies that target IL-6 trans-signaling in patients without rheumatoid arthritis for the purpose of increasing bone health [27].

## Preoperative Considerations

### Elective Preoperative Considerations

An aging population and the advent of improved technology in the field of arthroplasty have increased the prevalence of elective total knee, hip, and shoulder arthroplasty procedures [28, 29]. As a result, patients are turning to their primary care provider for preoperative evaluation for these elective procedures. In the geriatric population, preoperative optimization and risk evaluation are comprehensive including the assessment of the following: cognition, polypharmacy, functional status, nutrition, and cardiac and pulmonary risk [30, 31]. Thus, it is easy to overlook a patient's nutritional status during the preoperative screening process. Screening for malnutrition should be assessed by both the orthopedic surgeon and primary care provider. A recent publication found that 11.5% of patients undergoing elective arthroplasty had an albumin of < 3.4 g/l. Length of stay and readmission rates were reduced when at-risk patients with low albumin were transitioned to a high protein (100 g/day) and an anti-inflammatory diet. According to this study, an anti-inflammatory diet limits the intake of sugar, saturated fats, simple carbohydrates, and red meat. An anti-inflammatory diet consists of increased fish, nuts, seeds, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains [32••].

In a meta-analysis by Gu et al., patients with serologic markers of malnutrition (hypoalbuminemia, decreased total lymphocyte count, or transferrin) were at an increased risk for poor postoperative outcomes, including wound complications [33••]. After identifying those patients who are malnourished or at risk of malnutrition, an interdisciplinary team base approach should be taken to optimize these patients prior to any operative intervention [34].

In both the nourished and malnourished patient, a new concept focusing on enhanced recovery after surgery (ERAS) has emerged. It involves all aspects of surgery with the goal of reducing complications and length of hospital stay

[35]. Preoperatively, nutrition supplementation utilizing carbohydrate loading and immunonutrition theoretically reduces stress associated with surgery [36]. Studies have shown that preoperative carbohydrate loading has reduced postoperative insulin resistance [37]. However, while the efficacy of carbohydrate loading has not consistently conferred a benefit compared to placebo, a reduction in hospital stay compared to fasting has been demonstrated [38]. Immunonutrition involves nutritional supplementation with glutamine, arginine, omega-3 fatty acids, and nucleotides prior to elective surgery. This has been theorized to modulate the postsurgical inflammatory and immunosuppression response [39, 40]. However, no studies pertaining to immunonutrition currently exist in orthopedic literature.

### Urgent/Emergent Preoperative Considerations

For the geriatric patient who sustains a fragility fracture, optimization of preoperative nutrition is not possible. In the orthopedic literature, a delay of greater than 48 h to hip fracture fixation has been linked to increased rates of complications and mortality [41, 42]. As a result, many patients are admitted and begin their preoperative fasting in preparation of operative intervention.

Regardless of scheduled surgery time, a patient is made NPO at midnight and frequently fast longer than required. The updated American Society of Anesthesiologists practice guidelines recommend oral clear liquids up to 2 h and a light meal up to 6 h prior to procedure in an effort to reduce the fasting period [43]. Despite these recommendations, up to 25% of patients admitted for hip fracture will receive no oral intake leading up to surgery [44]. In an effort to reduce the duration of preoperative fasting, studies have looked at the benefits of preoperative carbohydrate drinks up to 2 h before surgery. Hospitalized patients had improved postoperative discomfort and reduced insulin resistance without pulmonary aspiration [45]. In light of these studies, nurses and physicians should be educated about the ability of patients to consume clear liquids up to 2 h before surgery.

### Postoperative Considerations

Wound healing, bone healing, and surgical site infection are examples of major concerns in this acute postoperative period. Many studies have closely linked malnutrition with postoperative complications and mortality. Malnourished patients who sustain hip fractures have a threefold increased mortality at 1 year compared to those who are well-nourished [46]. Not only do these patients experience a higher risk of requiring an assistive device postoperatively, they also are more likely to

lose independence. It is estimated that 10 to 20% of geriatric orthopedic patients are newly institutionalized into a long-term care facility following a hip fracture [47]. Further compounding the problem, 18–21% of institutionalized elderly experience undernutrition [48]. In a meta-analysis, the risk of surgical site infection in orthopedic patients was 2.5 times higher when albumin was <3.5 mg/d/L [49]. Vitamin D and calcium are well-known contributors to the fracture healing process and found to be globally deficient in the elderly [50, 51]. He et al. demonstrated that supplementation three times daily of an enteral nutrition powder (a form of Ensure) that contained many vitamins and minerals including vitamin D and calcium, in hip fracture patients with hypoalbuminemia, reduced the risk of wound complications and the length of hospital stay [52]. Even by postoperative day 3, the cohort treated with oral ensure powder demonstrated a significant increase in albumin levels [52]. Because hospitalization tends to decrease oral intake at baseline, this poses a challenge. Simply improving the presentation of a meal and access to the food by helping the patient cut and open their food containers can increase consumption in hospitalized patients [53]. Ensuring that the patient has proper dentition along with the correct food consistency available will increase oral intake. Oral intake will be increased when patients have proper food consistency and good dentition. Additionally, enriching the protein in foods the elderly are already intimately familiar with has been shown to increase protein intake significantly in the institutionalized [48].

While wound healing is an immediate postoperative issue, bone healing occurs over a longer period of time. A randomized controlled trial by Torbergsen et al. examined bone turnover markers in orthogeriatric hip fracture patients. They found decreased levels of bone turnover markers in the serum when vitamin D and vitamin K consumption was increased providing evidence for focused mineral supplementation to improve recovery in bone metabolism after hip fracture [54]. The intestinal biome may also play a role as probiotic treatment in a double-blind placebo-controlled clinical trial showed promise in accelerating the recovery period of older patients with distal radius fractures [55]. Prevention of further injury in the postoperative setting is also a key. Frequent exercise, balance training, and vitamin D supplementation has been shown effective at reducing falls in institutionalized older residents after several months. An interdisciplinary approach during acute care and rehabilitation phases after geriatric fracture improved the outcomes [56]. To improve patient care and their outcomes, a focused team approach especially with the supervision of a qualified nutritional staff is ideal.

### Preventative Measures in the Community

For the geriatric patient, sustaining a fragility fracture significantly reduces independence and quality of life and increases

risk of mortality [57]. Therefore, focus has been turned to prevention and identification of steps to reduce the incidence of these fractures. In 2009, the American Orthopedic Association launched the “Own the Bone” initiative to provide education surrounding fragility fractures. Other steps include bone mineral density screening, pharmacologic therapy, and mobile outreach programs [58, 59].

Osteoporosis increases fracture risk due to decreased bone mineral density. Screening and treatment for osteoporosis is the mainstay in the prevention of fragility fractures. Osteoporosis is diagnosed after bone mineral density screening reveals a T-score of less than or equal to  $-2.5$  or a FRAX greater than or 3% for 10-year probability of hip fracture or greater than 20% for major osteoporotic fracture [60]. Modifiable risk factors such as smoking, alcohol intake, and nutrition should be identified and addressed with the osteoporotic patient.

From a nutrition standpoint, prevention, identification, and treatment of malnutrition in the geriatric patient are vital. Malnourished patients have a 45% increased risk of falls compared to their well-nourished cohort [61]. As many studies point out, malnourished patients with hip fractures are at increased risk of death within that year [16, 62, 63].

Recommendations for nutritional supplementation with vitamin D and calcium vary by age and gender. Studies recommend at least 800–1000 IU of vitamin D per day and 1000–1200 mg of calcium daily [64]. Chronic hyponatremia has also been linked to osteoporosis and puts the patient at an increased risk of falls and subsequent fragility fractures [65]. Initiation of treatment after identification of osteoporosis and those at risk for fragility fractures has led to a reduction in fracture risk for these patients [66].

For geriatric patients who sustain a fragility fracture, it is important to prevent a secondary fracture. Wrist and vertebral compression fractures are known independent risk factors for subsequent hip fractures in both men and women [67]. In 2019, the American Society for Bone and Mineral Research provided recommendations for secondary fracture prevention [68]. Regarding nutritional supplementation, the panel recommended initiating at least 800 IU of vitamin D per day and calcium supplementation for those unable to intake 1200 mg/day from food sources [68]. Oral anti-osteoporosis (bisphosphonate) pharmacologic therapy should be initiated while in the hospital. Previously, bisphosphonates were thought to delay fracture healing; however, newer studies have called that into question [69–71].

## Conclusion

Nutrition of geriatric patients plays a crucial role in not only bone health but overall health. Screening patients for malnutrition at routine visits and preoperatively will reduce

complications associated with orthopedic surgery. For patients who sustain a hip fracture, nutritional status is a strong predictor of mortality, and interventions to minimize malnourishment may help improve outcomes. Prevention of these fractures with screening for osteoporosis, malnutrition, and intervening with nutritional supplementation with vitamin D, vitamin K, and calcium is a key. Fragility fractures will reduce a patient’s independence and quality of life and increase mortality risk. An interdisciplinary, team-based approach should be utilized for improving nutrition in the geriatric population.

Summary of recommended interventions to improve outcomes in malnourished elderly with hip fractures

Component	Intervention	Effect
Preoperative interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individualized intervention based on preoperative findings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decreased hospital stay</li> <li>Decreased wound complications</li> </ul>
Comprehensive preoperative physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehensive team-based assessment</li> <li>Nutritional assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved postoperative outcomes</li> <li>Improved nutritional status</li> <li>Improved fracture healing</li> </ul>
Preoperative laboratory testing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Carbohydrate loading</li> <li>Optimized nutritional labs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decreased hospital stay</li> <li>Improved postoperative outcomes</li> </ul>
Low albumin		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decreased wound complications</li> </ul>
Low ferritin		
Low total lymphocyte count		
Urgent emergent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limit NPO status</li> <li>Clear liquids</li> <li>Carbohydrate drinks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced insulin requirements</li> <li>Improved postoperative discomfort</li> </ul>
Postoperative interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Optimized nutrition</li> <li>Optimized calcium and vitamin D</li> <li>Provide familiar foods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased wound healing</li> <li>Increased bone healing</li> <li>Decreased surgical site infection</li> <li>Increased oral intake</li> </ul>
Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Treatment of osteoporosis with bisphosphates</li> <li>Optimization of calcium and vitamin D</li> <li>Optimization on nutritional status</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decreased fracture</li> <li>Improved patient strength, walking speed, and nutritional status</li> </ul>

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** None.

**Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent** This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.



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