



# The Role of Food in Supporting Wellbeing among Residents in Residential Aged Care: An Integrative Literature Review

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## Abstract:

Food plays a significant role in supporting the wellbeing of older adults living in residential aged care, extending beyond its nutritional function to influence emotional, social, cultural, and psychological wellbeing. Although previous research has examined nutrition, malnutrition, and food service quality, limited attention has been given to the broader contribution of food to residents' overall quality of life. This integrative literature review aimed to synthesise current evidence on the role of food in supporting the physical, emotional, social, and cultural wellbeing of older adults living in residential aged care. A systematic literature search was conducted across the databases CINAHL, Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Peer-reviewed studies published in English between 2013 and 2025 were screened according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Twelve studies met the eligibility criteria and were analysed using thematic analysis. Seven themes emerged: nutrition and physical wellbeing, resident autonomy and mealtime experience, food as an emotional and social experience, cultural appropriateness and identity, the role of staff in food satisfaction, innovation and sustainable food practices, and resident-centred models and policy implications. The findings demonstrate that food contributes to residents' well-being by promoting dignity, autonomy, social connection, cultural identity, and quality of life, while also maintaining nutritional health. The review highlights the importance of person-centred and culturally responsive food services and identifies implications for social work practice and residential aged care policy. Further research is recommended to strengthen the evidence base through resident-centred and culturally inclusive approaches to food service delivery.

**Keywords:** Residential Aged Care, Food, Wellbeing, Person-Centred Care, Older Adults, Social Work.

## Original Research

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Australia's population is ageing rapidly, increasing the demand for residential aged care services and placing greater emphasis on improving the quality of life of older adults. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024), adults aged 65 years and over are expected to comprise an increasing proportion of the Australian population, creating greater demand for long-term residential care. In response, the Australian aged care sector has increasingly adopted person-centred approaches that emphasise dignity, independence, choice, and wellbeing as fundamental principles of care (Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, 2024). Consequently, supporting the holistic

wellbeing of residents has become a key priority for aged care providers, policymakers, and health professionals.

Food is a fundamental component of residential aged care and contributes to wellbeing in ways that extend beyond meeting nutritional requirements. Although adequate nutrition is essential for maintaining physical health and reducing the risk of malnutrition, food also supports emotional wellbeing, social interaction, cultural identity, dignity, and autonomy (Abbey *et al.*, 2015; Barnes *et al.*, 2013). Mealtimes provide opportunities for residents to interact with others, maintain familiar routines, express personal preferences,

and enjoy everyday life. Research has shown that positive mealtime experiences are associated with greater resident satisfaction, improved food intake, and enhanced quality of life (Watkins *et al.*, 2017; Pankhurst *et al.*, 2023a).

As Australia's aged care population becomes increasingly culturally diverse, providing culturally appropriate food has become an important aspect of person-centred care. Meals that reflect residents' cultural, religious, and personal preferences can strengthen identity, belonging, and emotional comfort, whereas culturally inappropriate or inflexible food services may contribute to dissatisfaction, reduced food intake, and feelings of isolation (Koh *et al.*, 2022; Nyberg & Sylow, 2021; Pankhurst *et al.*, 2023b). These findings highlight that food is not only a nutritional intervention but also a meaningful part of residents' daily lives and overall wellbeing.

Previous research has explored a range of issues related to food in residential aged care, including nutrition, menu planning, mealtime environments, food service quality, and resident satisfaction (Abbey *et al.*, 2015; Barnes *et al.*, 2013; Porter *et al.*, 2022). More recent studies have also examined the importance of resident choice, cultural responsiveness, and person-centred food services in promoting wellbeing (Koh *et al.*, 2022; Pankhurst *et al.*, 2023a; Watkins *et al.*, 2017). Despite these advances, the literature remains dispersed across nutrition, nursing, gerontology, and social work, with relatively few reviews synthesising food as a multidimensional contributor to physical, emotional, social, and cultural wellbeing. A comprehensive synthesis of the available evidence is needed to better understand how food supports residents' wellbeing and to inform person-centred practice within residential aged care.

This integrative literature review synthesises current evidence on the role of food in supporting the wellbeing of older adults living in residential aged care. By examining findings from qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research, the review aims to identify the ways in which food contributes to residents'

physical, emotional, social, and cultural wellbeing and to consider the implications for aged care practice and social work.

### **Aim of the Study and Research Questions**

This study investigates the role of food in supporting the wellbeing of residents in aged care facilities. Wellbeing is understood holistically, encompassing physical health, emotional comfort, social connection, and cultural identity (AASW, 2020). Food is more than just nutrition; it contributes to dignity, autonomy, and life satisfaction (Rosenberg & McCulloch, 2022). Research suggests that when residents are included in food-related decisions, their emotional wellbeing and satisfaction improve (Watkins *et al.*, 2017; Pankhurst, Yaxley, & Miller, 2023). In contrast, lack of variety or culturally inappropriate meals can lead to frustration, social isolation, and loss of autonomy (Barnes *et al.*, 2013; Koh, Thiru Manickam).

Despite growing awareness of the importance of food in aged care, many services still fall short of providing inclusive, culturally responsive food experiences that prioritise resident preferences and dignity. By centring residents' voices, this study aims to inform person-centred food services that uphold social work values such as empowerment, inclusion, and respect (AASW, 2020).

1. What is the role of food in supporting residents' wellbeing in aged care?
2. What are residents' views on food quality, diversity, and cultural appropriateness?

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Review Design**

This study adopted an integrative literature review methodology to examine the role of food in supporting the wellbeing of older adults living in residential aged care. An integrative literature review was selected because it allows evidence from qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and review studies to be synthesised, providing a comprehensive understanding of complex health and social care issues (Kiteley & Stogdon, 2014; Ridley, 2012). This approach is particularly appropriate for exploring food and wellbeing because the topic has been investigated across multiple

disciplines, including nursing, nutrition, gerontology, and social work.

## 2.2 Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted across the databases CINAHL, Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Peer-reviewed studies published in English between 2013 and 2025 were identified and screened using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. These databases were selected because they contain peer-reviewed literature relevant to aged care, health sciences, nutrition, and social work.

The search included articles published in English between 2013 and 2025. Search terms included aged care, residential aged care, nursing home, older adults, food, nutrition, mealtime experience, food services, wellbeing, resident satisfaction, quality of life, cultural identity, and person-centred care. Boolean operators (AND and OR) were used to combine keywords and improve the precision of the search.

## 2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

- Were published in peer-reviewed journals.
- Were written in English
- Were published between 2013 and 2025
- Focused on older adults living in residential aged care or nursing homes; and
- Examined the relationship between food and residents' physical, emotional, social, or cultural wellbeing.

Studies were excluded if they:

- Focused exclusively on acute care or hospital settings
- Investigated only disease-specific nutritional interventions without considering resident wellbeing
- Were editorials, conference abstracts, opinion papers, or other forms of grey literature
- Did not directly address the review question.

## 2.4 Study Selection

The database search identified approximately 100 records. After duplicate articles were removed, titles and abstracts were

screened to determine their relevance to the review question. Twenty-five full-text articles were assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Fourteen articles were excluded because they focused primarily on clinical nutrition, disease management, or settings outside residential aged care. A total of 12 studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final review.

## 2.5 Data Extraction and Analysis

Relevant information was extracted from each included study, including the author, year of publication, country, study design, participants, aims, and key findings. The findings were analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved repeatedly reviewing the studies, identifying recurring patterns, grouping similar findings, and developing themes that reflected the contribution of food to residents' wellbeing. The final themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately represented the evidence across the included studies.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Characteristics of Included Studies

The literature search resulted in the inclusion of 12 studies published between 2013 and 2025. The studies were conducted in Australia, the United Kingdom, Japan, Denmark, Sweden, and Switzerland, providing a broad perspective on food and wellbeing in residential aged care. The review included qualitative studies, quantitative studies, mixed-methods research, systematic reviews, and scoping reviews. Together, these studies explored a range of topics, including nutrition, resident autonomy, mealtime experiences, cultural food preferences, staff practices, food service innovation, and resident-centred care.

### 3.2 Thematic Findings

The thematic analysis identified seven interrelated themes describing the role of food in supporting the wellbeing of older adults living in residential aged care. These themes were: (1) nutrition and physical wellbeing, (2) resident autonomy and mealtime experience, (3) food as an emotional and social experience, (4) cultural appropriateness and identity, (5) the role of staff in food satisfaction, (6) innovation and

sustainable food practices, and (7) resident-centred models and policy implications. Together, these themes demonstrate that food contributes to residents' wellbeing through physical, psychological, social, and cultural pathways.

### 3.2.1 Nutrition and Physical Wellbeing

Evidence from the included studies consistently indicates that nutrition is a fundamental determinant of physical wellbeing among older adults living in residential aged care. Across the included studies, adequate nutritional intake was associated with improved physical functioning, reduced frailty, enhanced immune function, and a lower risk of mortality (Abbey *et al.*, 2015; Kurata *et al.*, 2023; Yu *et al.*, 2023). Although the studies examined different aspects of nutrition, they collectively demonstrate that maintaining adequate dietary intake is essential for supporting healthy ageing and preserving residents' quality of life.

Evidence further suggests that nutritional wellbeing depends not only on the nutritional value of meals but also on the quality of food services and the provision of individualised care. While Kurata *et al.*, (2023) highlighted the benefits of higher dietary protein intake in reducing mortality, Yu *et al.*, (2023) emphasised the importance of balanced dietary patterns in maintaining physical performance. Similarly, Abbey *et al.*, (2015) argued that nutritional assessment, personalised dietary interventions, and appropriate menu planning are critical for preventing malnutrition and promoting overall wellbeing in residential aged care.

Taken together, these findings indicate that effective nutritional care extends beyond simply meeting dietary requirements. A comprehensive approach that combines nutritious meals with individualised assessment and person-centred food service is more likely to support residents' health, independence, and overall wellbeing.

### 3.2.2 Resident Autonomy and Mealtime Experience

The reviewed literature consistently identifies resident autonomy as an important

determinant of wellbeing in residential aged care. Across the included studies, opportunities to choose meals, decide when to eat, and participate in food-related decision-making were associated with greater dignity, independence, satisfaction, and quality of life, whereas inflexible food service practices and limited menu options reduced residents' sense of control over their daily lives (Abbey *et al.*, 2015; Watkins *et al.*, 2017; Pankhurst *et al.*, 2023a).

Collectively, the evidence indicates that person-centred food services support both nutritional and psychosocial wellbeing by recognising residents' preferences and involving them in menu planning and mealtime decisions. Greater resident participation was associated with improved meal satisfaction, increased food intake, and a stronger sense of autonomy, reflecting the principles of the Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards that promote dignity, choice, and active participation in everyday care (Pankhurst *et al.*, 2023a; Watkins *et al.*, 2017; Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, 2024

### 3.2.3 Food as an Emotional and Social Experience

Across the included studies, food was recognised as more than a source of nutrition, contributing significantly to residents' emotional wellbeing and social connectedness. Shared mealtimes, supportive interactions with staff, and opportunities for food-related reminiscence were consistently associated with greater social participation, reduced loneliness, and enhanced emotional wellbeing (Barnes *et al.*, 2013; Watkins *et al.*, 2017; Pankhurst *et al.*, 2023b). These findings suggest that the social environment surrounding meals is an important determinant of residents' quality of life.

The evidence further indicates that meaningful mealtime experiences foster companionship, strengthen residents' sense of belonging, and reinforce personal identity. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that food supports emotional and social wellbeing by creating opportunities for connection, enjoyment, and meaningful engagement, highlighting the importance of viewing mealtimes as an integral component of person-

centred residential aged care rather than solely as occasions for nutritional intake.

### 3.2.4 Cultural Appropriateness and Identity

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that culturally appropriate food is an essential component of person-centred residential aged care. Across the included studies, meals that reflected residents' cultural, religious, and personal preferences promoted familiarity, comfort, and a stronger sense of identity and belonging, contributing positively to emotional wellbeing and overall quality of life (Gerber & Merkle, 2023; Koh *et al.*, 2022; Watkins *et al.*, 2017). These findings suggest that food serves not only as a source of nutrition but also as an important expression of cultural identity and personal values.

Conversely, the evidence indicates that limited access to culturally appropriate meals may reduce residents' satisfaction with food services and contribute to feelings of exclusion and social isolation. As residential aged care populations become increasingly culturally diverse, the findings highlight the need for flexible and culturally responsive food services that recognise residents' diverse backgrounds and preferences. Such approaches are fundamental to delivering inclusive, person-centred care that respects dignity, promotes wellbeing, and supports residents' quality of life.

### 3.2.5 Role of Staff in Food Satisfaction

The findings consistently demonstrate that staff play a central role in shaping residents' mealtime experiences and satisfaction with food services. Across the included studies, respectful communication, responsiveness to residents' preferences, and supportive interactions during mealtimes contributed to greater food satisfaction, enhanced emotional wellbeing, and more positive dining experiences (Barnes *et al.*, 2013; Watkins *et al.*, 2017; Pankhurst *et al.*, 2023a). These findings suggest that the quality of interpersonal relationships between residents and staff is an important component of person-centred care.

The evidence further indicates that staff knowledge, attitudes, and communication skills influence the successful delivery of resident-

centred food services. Facilities that encouraged staff to recognise individual preferences and respond to residents' cultural and personal needs were more likely to create inclusive and enjoyable mealtime environments (Koh *et al.*, 2022; Pankhurst *et al.*, 2023a). Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of ongoing staff education in person-centred practice, communication, and cultural responsiveness to improve residents' wellbeing and the quality of food service delivery.

### 3.2.6 Innovation and Sustainable Food Practices

The available evidence suggests that innovative and sustainable food service practices can enhance both residents' wellbeing and the quality of care in residential aged care settings. Across the included studies, strategies such as flexible meal options, resident-informed menu planning, improved food presentation, and initiatives to reduce food waste were associated with more positive dining experiences and greater resident satisfaction (Chen *et al.*, 2023; Porter *et al.*, 2022). These approaches demonstrate that innovation in food services extends beyond operational efficiency to support dignity, choice, and quality of life.

The findings also indicate that innovation should be guided by person-centred principles rather than focusing solely on nutritional or environmental outcomes. For example, improving the visual presentation of texture-modified meals enhanced food acceptance and preserved dignity among residents with swallowing difficulties (Chen *et al.*, 2023), while sustainable food service models emphasised balancing nutritional quality, resident preferences, and environmental responsibility (Porter *et al.*, 2022). Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of adopting innovative and resident-centred food service practices that improve wellbeing while supporting the long-term sustainability of residential aged care services.

### 3.2.7 Resident-Centred Models and Policy Implications

Collectively, the findings support resident-centred food service models as a fundamental component of high-quality

residential aged care. Across the included studies, involving residents in menu planning, meal evaluation, and food-related decision-making was associated with greater satisfaction, autonomy, and trust in food services (Nyberg & Sylow, 2021; Pankhurst *et al.*, 2023a). In contrast, rigid organisational routines and limited flexibility often restricted residents' ability to exercise choice, reducing opportunities for meaningful participation in everyday life.

The evidence further suggests that organisational policies and care practices should prioritise resident choice, cultural responsiveness, and active participation to enhance both wellbeing and quality of care. These findings are consistent with the Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards, which emphasise dignity, consumer choice, and partnership in care planning (Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, 2024). Recognising food as an integral component of person-centred care has important implications for policy development, organisational practice, and continuous quality improvement within residential aged care services.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Interpretation of the Findings

This integrative literature review demonstrates that food should be recognised as a fundamental component of person-centred residential aged care rather than solely as a means of meeting nutritional requirements. By synthesising evidence from qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies, the review highlights that food contributes to residents' wellbeing through interconnected physical, emotional, social, and cultural pathways. These findings reinforce the importance of adopting holistic approaches to care that acknowledge the broader role of food in supporting dignity, autonomy, identity, and quality of life.

Although maintaining adequate nutritional intake remains essential for healthy ageing, the findings suggest that nutritional wellbeing is influenced by factors beyond the nutritional content of meals. Meal quality, dining environments, resident choice, staff interactions, and culturally responsive food

services all contribute to residents' experiences and may influence food intake, satisfaction, and overall wellbeing. This highlights the need for residential aged care providers to move beyond task-oriented food provision towards person-centred models that recognise residents' individual preferences and everyday lived experiences.

A notable finding of this review is the consistent emphasis on resident autonomy as a key element of person-centred care. Opportunities to participate in menu planning, choose meals, and make decisions about mealtimes were associated with greater dignity, independence, and satisfaction across the included studies. These findings are consistent with the Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards, which promote consumer choice and active participation in decisions affecting everyday life (Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, 2024). However, the evidence also suggests that organisational routines, staffing pressures, and inflexible food service systems may limit opportunities for meaningful resident participation, indicating that implementation of person-centred principles remains challenging in some residential aged care settings.

The review further demonstrates that food plays an important role in promoting social connection and maintaining cultural identity. Positive mealtime environments encouraged interaction, reduced feelings of loneliness, and strengthened residents' sense of belonging, while culturally appropriate meals supported familiarity, comfort, and respect for individual values. As residential aged care populations become increasingly diverse, these findings emphasise the importance of culturally responsive food services that recognise residents' cultural and religious preferences as an integral component of person-centred care.

By integrating evidence from nutrition, nursing, gerontology, and social work, this review extends the current understanding of food beyond its traditional nutritional focus. Rather than viewing food solely as a clinical intervention, the findings demonstrate that it is closely linked to residents' rights, dignity, identity, and everyday wellbeing. This broader

perspective provides a stronger foundation for developing food service policies and care practices that promote holistic wellbeing and improve the quality of residential aged care.

#### 4.2 Implications for Social Work Practice

The findings of this review have important implications for social work practice in residential aged care. While food is often viewed as a nutritional or clinical concern, this review demonstrates that it is also closely linked to residents' dignity, autonomy, cultural identity, social inclusion, and overall wellbeing. These dimensions align with the core social work values of human rights, self-determination, social justice, and person-centred practice, highlighting the important role of social workers in promoting residents' quality of life.

Social workers are well positioned to advocate for residents' participation in food-related decisions and to ensure that individual preferences, cultural backgrounds, and personal values are recognised in care planning. Supporting residents to express their preferences regarding meals, dining environments, and cultural food practices can strengthen autonomy and promote meaningful participation in everyday life. Such approaches are consistent with the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (AASW, 2020), which emphasises respect for dignity, inclusion, and empowerment.

The findings also highlight the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in delivering person-centred food services. Working alongside nurses, dietitians, hospitality staff, managers, and families, social workers can help ensure that food services reflect residents' physical, emotional, social, and cultural needs rather than focusing solely on nutritional outcomes. In addition, social workers can contribute to organisational quality improvement by advocating for culturally responsive food services, resident participation in menu planning, and policies that support choice and flexibility during mealtimes.

As Australia's residential aged care sector becomes increasingly culturally diverse, culturally responsive practice will become even

more important. Social workers have a key role in promoting inclusive care by recognising the influence of culture, religion, language, and lived experience on residents' food preferences and mealtime experiences. By advocating for equitable and culturally safe food services, social workers can help create care environments that respect diversity, strengthen residents' sense of belonging, and enhance overall wellbeing.

#### 4.3 Strengths and Limitations

This review has several strengths. By adopting an integrative literature review methodology, it synthesised evidence from qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and review studies, providing a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between food and wellbeing in residential aged care. Integrating evidence from multiple disciplines, including nutrition, nursing, gerontology, and social work, enabled a broader examination of the physical, emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of food. This interdisciplinary approach strengthens the review by demonstrating that food contributes to residents' wellbeing through multiple interconnected pathways rather than solely through nutritional outcomes.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The review included only peer-reviewed studies published in English between 2013 and 2025, which may have resulted in language and publication bias by excluding relevant studies published in other languages or grey literature. In addition, the included studies varied considerably in their research designs, sample characteristics, and outcome measures, limiting direct comparison across studies. Although evidence was drawn from several countries, relatively few studies were conducted within the Australian residential aged care context, which may affect the transferability of some findings to Australian practice and policy. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and highlight the need for further high-quality research in this area.

#### 4.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should prioritise qualitative and participatory studies that place

residents' lived experiences at the centre of food service research. Greater attention is needed to the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) residents, First Nations older adults, people living with dementia, and other underrepresented populations (Gerber & Merkle, 2023; Koh *et al.*, 2022). Additional intervention studies evaluating innovative, culturally responsive, and resident-centred food service models are needed to strengthen the evidence base and inform residential aged care policy and practice. Further Australian research is also recommended to evaluate the implementation of the Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards and their impact on residents' wellbeing and food service delivery.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This integrative literature review demonstrates that food is a fundamental component of person-centred residential aged care, contributing to residents' physical, emotional, social, and cultural wellbeing. By synthesising evidence from qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies, the review highlights that food extends beyond its nutritional function to support dignity, autonomy, social connection, cultural identity, and overall quality of life.

The findings emphasise the importance of person-centred and culturally responsive food services that actively involve residents in food-related decisions and recognise their individual preferences and lived experiences. Creating positive mealtime environments, promoting resident choice, and supporting culturally appropriate food practices can enhance wellbeing while aligning with contemporary aged care standards and quality improvement initiatives.

This review also highlights the contribution of social work in promoting residents' rights, advocating for inclusive and culturally responsive practice, and supporting interdisciplinary approaches to food service delivery. As residential aged care continues to evolve, recognising food as an essential element of holistic care has the potential to improve both residents' everyday experiences and the overall quality of aged care services. Continued

research and policy development will be important to strengthen the evidence base and support the implementation of person-centred food service practices across diverse residential aged care settings.

## Abbreviations

AIHW – Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

AASW – Australian Association of Social Workers

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