Malnutrition is associated with increased mortality in older adults regardless of the cause of death

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Abstract
Malnutrition predicts preterm death, but whether this is valid irrespective of the cause of death is unknown. The aim of the present study was to determine whether malnutrition is associated with cause-specific mortality in older adults. This cohort study was conducted in Sweden and included 1767 individuals aged ≥65 years admitted to hospital in 2008–2009. On the basis of the Mini Nutritional Assessment instrument, nutritional risk was assessed as well nourished (score 24–30), at risk of malnutrition (score 17–23.5) or malnourished (score <17). Cause of death was classified according to the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th Revision, into twenty different causes of death. Data were analysed using Cox proportional hazards regression models. At baseline, 55.1% were at risk of malnutrition, and 9.4% of the participants were malnourished. During a median follow-up of 5.1 years, 839 participants (47.5%) died. The multiple Cox regression model identified significant associations (hazard ratio (HR)) between malnutrition and risk of malnutrition, respectively, and death due to neoplasms (HR 2.43 and 1.32); mental or behavioural disorders (HR 5.73 and 5.44); diseases of the nervous (HR 4.39 and 2.08); circulatory (HR 1.95 and 1.57) or respiratory system (HR 2.19 and 1.49); and symptoms, signs and abnormal clinical and laboratory findings, not elsewhere classified (HR 2.23 and 1.43). Malnutrition and risk of malnutrition are associated with increased mortality regardless of the cause of death, which emphasises the need for nutritional screening to identify older adults who may require nutritional support in order to avoid preterm death.

Key words: Cause-specific mortality: Cohort studies: Malnutrition: Older adults: Survival analyses

Malnutrition due to starvation, disease or ageing can be defined as a state resulting from lack of uptake or intake of nutrition leading to altered body composition (decreased fat-free mass) and body cell mass leading to diminished physical and mental function and impaired clinical outcome from disease (p. 335)¹. The condition is highly prevalent among older adults (≥65 years old) admitted to hospital – 23–39% are malnourished and 43–46% are at risk of malnutrition²–⁴ according to the screening instrument Mini Nutritional Assessment (MNA). A large number of older adults are already malnourished when admitted to hospital⁵, and the condition is associated with a markedly increased morbidity⁶, impaired functional ability⁷ and a lower quality of life⁸. In addition, malnourished individuals and individuals at risk of malnutrition have a higher mortality compared with well-nourished individuals – that is, they die preterm⁹. Even though up to 86% of older adults admitted to hospital are at nutritional risk (malnourished or at risk of malnutrition)⁵, and the consequences are severe, nutritional screening is still not performed as a routine in European hospitals and patients at risk of malnutrition may go undetected and untreated⁴–⁸.

To promote nutritional screening, the European Society of Clinical Nutrition and Metabolism (ESPEN) has published guidelines for nutritional screening, and the MNA instrument is recommended specifically to screen older adults for malnutrition¹², regardless of setting. According to the diagnostic criteria for malnutrition published by ESPEN in 2015, individuals identified by screening as at risk of malnutrition with, for example, the MNA, the diagnosis of malnutrition should be based on either a low BMI (<18.5 kg/m²) or on the combined finding of weight loss together with either reduced BMI (BMI <20 kg/m² if <70 years of age, or <22 kg/m² if >70 years of age) or a low fat-free mass index using sex-specific cut-off points¹¹.

We recently conducted a 4-year follow-up study, in which we screened 1771 older adults (≥65 years of age) for malnutrition with the MNA, as well as examined all-cause mortality. At the time of planning the study and conducting the baseline recruitment for this study (in 2008–2009), these diagnostic criteria for malnutrition did not exist. Therefore, the original MNA was used to estimate the prevalence of malnutrition¹³. At follow-up after 4 years, we found that the risk of death was almost four times higher in malnourished compared with well-nourished older adults¹⁴. This raised the question whether malnourished older adults with certain diseases are more likely to die compared with well-nourished people.

Abbreviations: HR, hazard ratio; ICD-10, International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th Revision; MNA, Mini Nutritional Assessment.

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Only one previous study has examined the relationship between malnutrition and cause-specific mortality, categorised as cardiovascular, cancer or respiratory mortality\(^{(15)}\). In that study, 358 people (mean age 84.6 years old) in long-term care settings were screened with the MNA and the Geriatric Nutritional Risk Index (GNRI). At follow-up after 6.5 years, there was no association between malnutrition assessed with the MNA and cause-specific mortality; only the association between nutritional risk assessed by the GNRI and cardiovascular mortality was significant\(^{(15)}\). However, in that study, malnutrition was not associated with other causes of death.

Thus, knowledge whether the malnutrition identified with the MNA instrument has any clinical importance in terms of cause-specific mortality has not yet been thoroughly established\(^{(15)}\). Investigating different causes of death related to malnutrition could be used to examine whether the underlying disease – for example, cancer or CVD is decisive for predicting a preterm death – or whether the nutritional state (malnourished, at risk of malnutrition, well nourished) is more important than the underlying medical condition. Such knowledge could strengthen the decision to screen for malnutrition in clinical practice. If individuals at risk of malnutrition are detected before the condition is manifest, preventive nutritional interventions could be initiated. The present prospective cohort study was undertaken to clarify whether malnutrition is associated with cause-specific mortality in older adults.

**Methods**

**Study design and setting**

In this prospective cohort study, nutritional screening was performed in patients aged ≥65 years admitted to a medium-sized Swedish hospital during the 15 months from March 2008 to May 2009. Cause-specific mortality was followed up until 31 December 2013.

**Study population**

Fig. 1. describes the patient’s recruitment and reasons for exclusions and loss to follow-up.

The baseline sample comprised 1771 patients. Of these, 706 (40 %) were admitted to two internal medicine wards, 681 to two surgical wards (38 %) and 384 (22 %) to one orthopaedic ward. After a median follow-up of 5.1 years, the final cohort comprised 1767 patients, of which 928 were still alive and 839 participants were deceased.

A sample size calculation was performed on the basis of studies that evaluated malnutrition and mortality in older adults in hospital\(^{(16–19)}\). The expected mortality during the 3 years of follow-up was 24 % among the well-nourished patients and 35 % among the malnourished patients; that is, a difference of 11 percentage points, with a minimum prevalence of 17 % well-nourished patients and 16 % malnourished patients. To obtain a power

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**Fig. 1.** Flow chart describing participant recruitment from admission to a medium-sized hospital in Central Sweden at the baseline in 2008–2009 to 5-year follow-up in 2013.
(1-β) of 80% at a two-sided significance level of \( \alpha = 0.05 \) with a \( Z \) test for difference in proportions with an expected difference in mortality of 11 percentage points using these prevalences, a total study population of 1682 participants would be needed. To take into account expected dropouts, non-responses and missing values, the aim was to recruit 2080 participants. As the dropout rate was lower than expected, a decision was made to end recruitment when nutritional screening had been performed in 1795 patients in the study.

**Data collection at baseline**

The data collected consecutively at baseline included the following clinical characteristics: age (years), female sex (yes/no), BMI (kg/m\(^2\)), current smoking (yes/no), number of medications taken, overnight fast >11 h (yes/no), eating episodes ≤4 (yes/no), independent cooking (yes/no), living situation (living alone, cohabiting or in a nursing home), country of birth (Sweden or another country) and diagnoses. Primary and secondary medical diagnoses according to the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th Revision (ICD-10), were collected at discharge. These were categorised into the twenty main diagnosis groups of the ICD-10 classification system by registering a ‘yes’ for each patient who had a primary or secondary diagnosis with an ICD-10 code belonging to the diagnosis group in question, and otherwise registering a ‘no’. The participants were asked about the usual length of their overnight fast. The length of their overnight fast was defined as the period between the last eating episode in the evening and the first eating episode the following morning. The number of eating episodes per day was recorded as how often the patient usually ate breakfast, lunch, dinner and between-meal and evening snacks. A detailed description of the baseline survey has been published previously\(^{20}\). To evaluate the cumulative burden of co-morbidity, the Charlson co-morbidity index\(^{21}\) was constructed in the same way, using ICD-10 coding according to Quan et al.\(^{22}\) and weights from Charlson et al.\(^{21}\).

**Nutritional screening**

Nutritional screening was performed with the original eighteen-item MNA instrument that categorises patients into well-nourished (score 24–30), at risk of malnutrition (score 17–23.5) or malnourished (score <17) groups. BMI was calculated using the standard formula of weight (kg)/height squared (m\(^2\)). Weight was measured with a calibrated chair or mobile lift scale (\( n = 21 \)) to the nearest kg after the patient had emptied the bladder and with the patient wearing a light hospital robe. Height was measured to the nearest centimetre with a stadiometer. Participants unable to stand upright were measured using a sliding calliper (\( n = 345 \)) or, as a last resort, by calculating their height from half the arm span (demi-span (cm)) + 57.8 for men and (1.45 x demi-span (cm)) + 60.1 for women\(^{23}\).

MNA is a validated screening instrument\(^{13}\) developed to provide an easy, reliable way to screen for malnutrition in adults aged ≥65 years. The instrument comprises eighteen weighted items and takes about 15 min to complete. The nutritional screening was performed during the first few days of the patient’s stay at the hospital. In total, eighteen personnel collected the data (two or four registered nurses, assistant nurses or registered dietitians in each ward). The researchers responsible for the study provided training to the personnel in the interpretation of the questions in the MNA and obtaining measurements.

**Data collection at follow-up**

To analyse the relationship between malnutrition and cause-specific mortality, the participants were followed up through the Swedish Cause of Death Register, which is managed by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare\(^{24}\). Data were also retrieved through the Swedish Population Register to identify emigrated individuals\(^{25}\). Causes of death were coded and tabulated according to ICD-10\(^{26}\). In this analysis, cause-specific mortality was determined using all causes of death documented on the death certificate, rather than just the single underlying cause of death\(^{20}\). This resulted in some individuals being counted in more than one category of cause-specific mortality. The main diagnostic groups were analysed according to the ICD-10 or subcategories of these with ≥50 deaths, which resulted in twenty different causes of death being analysed.

**Ethical considerations**

The Regional Uppsala Ethical Review Board approved the study (approval no.: 2007–323). Before the patients entered the study, all of them provided their written informed consent. For patients who were unable to communicate, a next-of-kin was asked whether there was any objection to the patient’s participation in the study (\( n = 23 \)), and this person assisted in answering the questions in the MNA. Malnourished participants received only routine interventions at the hospital, and no additional interventions were included in the study. However, the participants received information about their risk of malnutrition, which gave them the opportunity to consider whether they needed or wanted to take further actions, such as consulting a diettitian. If the participant was unable to communicate, the relative was informed of the patient’s nutritional risk.

**Statistical analysis**

For descriptive statistics, categorical data are presented as frequencies and percentages. Discrete and continuous data are given as medians and interquartile ranges (25th–75th percentile) or as mean values and standard deviations. Differences between the three nutritional screening groups were analysed using Pearson’s \( \chi^2 \) test for categorical data, the Kruskal–Wallis test for discrete data and ANOVA for continuous data.

For analysis of cause-specific death, survival was calculated from the date of the MNA assessment to the date of cause-specific death or to the date of censoring. Dates of emigration, end of follow-up and death from other causes were used as censoring dates. Multiple causes of death were analysed (i.e. all conditions mentioned on a death certificate)\(^{26}\). Consequently, if an individual had three causes of death registered on the
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dearth certificate, the patient could be included as an event in up to three different Cox regression analyses.

Kaplan–Meier curves were created, and associated log-rank tests were calculated. In addition, simple and multiple Cox proportional hazards regression models were used. In the regression analyses, nutritional screening groups were entered as a categorical variable with three levels: well nourished, at risk of malnutrition or malnourished, with well nourished used as reference category.

Separate multivariate Cox regression models were constructed, with cause-specific death as the outcome in each of the models. All multivariate Cox regression models were adjusted for the same variables to ensure that the models are comparable with each other – age, sex, BMI, BMI × BMI, current smoking, number of medications, overnight fast > 11 h and living situation (lives alone, cohabits or in a nursing home). Each model was adjusted for the specific diagnosis at baseline – that is, if the outcome was death from cancer, the model was adjusted for presence of cancer at baseline. Further, the models were adjusted for the cumulative burden of co-morbidity according to the Charlson co-morbidity index (21). For all statistical tests, a two-sided \( P < 0.05 \) was considered significant. All data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22.

Results

Participant characteristics

A total of 1767 participants were followed up in the present prospective cohort study: 628 (35.5 %) were well nourished, 973 (55.1 %) were at risk of malnutrition and 166 (9.4 %) were malnourished at baseline. The mean age of the participants was 78.1 (sd 7.8) years at baseline, and most of them were women (56.0 %). Almost all the participants lived at home (95.1 %) before their admission to hospital, and a minority lived in a nursing home (4.9 %).

Table 1 lists the participants’ characteristics. All the baseline characteristics differed between the participants’ nutritional screening groups except for sex distribution. At baseline, differences in nutritional screening groups were found for the ICD-10 diagnoses infectious diseases (A00–B99) \( (P < 0.004) \), mental and behavioural disorders (F00–F99) \( (P < 0.001) \), heart failure (150) \( (P < 0.008) \) and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (J44) \( (P < 0.019) \) (not in table).

Cause-specific mortality

During a median follow-up of 5.1 (Q1 4.9; Q3 5.6) years, 839 participants (47.5 %) died. Most died in hospital (53.4 %) or in a nursing home (36.0 %), and only a minority (9.6 %) passed away at home. The place of death was unknown for 1 %. The mean age at death was 82.8 (sd 7.8) years (range: 65–102 years).

The most frequent causes of death were diseases of the circulatory system (62.6 %): heart failure, (29.4 %), ischaemic heart disease (19.8 %) and cerebrovascular disease (15.6 %). The next most common cause was neoplasms (35.9 %): neoplasms of the digestive organs (16.6 %).

Table 2 displays the causes of death in relation to the number of deceased individuals \( (n 839) \) and to the nutritional screening

| Table 1. Baseline characteristics in relation to nutritional screening groups (well nourished, at risk of malnutrition or malnourished), derived from the Mini Nutritional Assessment instrument among 1767 older adults (Mean values and standard deviations and percentages) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Well nourished (n 628)</th>
<th>At risk of malnutrition (n 973)</th>
<th>Malnourished (n 166)</th>
<th>( P^* )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (years)</strong></td>
<td>Mean 76.5</td>
<td>sd 7.2</td>
<td>% NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>% 52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BMI (kg/m²)</strong></td>
<td>Mean 27.5</td>
<td>sd 4.0</td>
<td>% NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current smoker</strong></td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>% 8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of medications</strong></td>
<td>Mean 5.1</td>
<td>sd 3.6</td>
<td>% NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of diagnoses</strong></td>
<td>Mean 2.9</td>
<td>sd 1.6</td>
<td>% NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overnight fast</strong></td>
<td>Mean &gt; 11 h</td>
<td>% NA</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eating episodes</strong></td>
<td>Mean ≥ 4</td>
<td>% NA</td>
<td>62.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&lt; 4</strong></td>
<td>Mean &lt; 4</td>
<td>% NA</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meal provision</strong></td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
<td>% 93.1</td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cooks independently</strong></td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
<td>% 93.1</td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meals on wheels (yes)</strong></td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
<td>% 5.4</td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nursing home (yes)</strong></td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
<td>% 1.9</td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Restaurant (yes)</strong></td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
<td>% 3.0</td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living situation</strong></td>
<td>Mean alone</td>
<td>% 40.0</td>
<td>Mean alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cohabits</strong></td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
<td>% 58.0</td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nursing home</strong></td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
<td>% 2.1</td>
<td>Mean yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country of birth</strong></td>
<td>Mean Sweden</td>
<td>% 82.8</td>
<td>Mean Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other countries</strong></td>
<td>Mean NA</td>
<td>% 7.2</td>
<td>Mean NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( \text{NA, not applicable.} \)

*ANOVA for continuous variables, the Kruskal–Wallis test for discrete variables and the \( \chi^2 \) test for categorical variables.

† Multiple answers allowed.
Table 2. Causes of death in relation to the number of deceased individuals (n 839) and to nutritional screening groups among 1767 older adults (Numbers and percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ICD-10*</th>
<th>Cause of death†</th>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Deceased (n 839)</th>
<th>Well nourished (n 628)</th>
<th>At risk of malnutrition (n 973)</th>
<th>Malnourished (n 166)</th>
<th>P‡</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A00–B99</td>
<td>Certain infectious and parasitic diseases</td>
<td>59 7 0</td>
<td>12 1 9</td>
<td>39 4 0</td>
<td>8 4 8</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C00–D48</td>
<td>Neoplasms</td>
<td>301 35 9</td>
<td>93 14 8</td>
<td>163 16 8</td>
<td>45 27 1</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15–C26</td>
<td>Malignant neoplasms of digestive organs</td>
<td>137 16 6</td>
<td>39 6 2</td>
<td>77 7 9</td>
<td>21 12 7</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E00–E90</td>
<td>Endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases</td>
<td>154 18 4</td>
<td>48 7 6</td>
<td>88 9 0</td>
<td>18 10 8</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E00–E90, E15–E90</td>
<td>Endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases, excluding diabetes</td>
<td>13 4 2</td>
<td>10 1 6</td>
<td>17 1 7</td>
<td>8 4 8</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F00–F99</td>
<td>Mental and behavioural disorders</td>
<td>77 9 2</td>
<td>6 1 0</td>
<td>58 6 0</td>
<td>13 7 8</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G00–G99</td>
<td>Diseases of the nervous system</td>
<td>66 7 9</td>
<td>12 1 9</td>
<td>42 4 3</td>
<td>12 7 2</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I00–I99</td>
<td>Diseases of the circulatory system</td>
<td>525 62 6</td>
<td>122 19 4</td>
<td>325 33 4</td>
<td>78 47 0</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I20–I25</td>
<td>Ischaemic heart diseases</td>
<td>166 19 8</td>
<td>37 5 9</td>
<td>111 11 4</td>
<td>18 10 8</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I50</td>
<td>Heart failure</td>
<td>247 29 4</td>
<td>60 9 6</td>
<td>154 15 8</td>
<td>33 19 9</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I60–I69</td>
<td>Cerebrovascular diseases</td>
<td>131 15 6</td>
<td>34 5 4</td>
<td>79 8 1</td>
<td>18 10 8</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J00–J99</td>
<td>Diseases of the respiratory system</td>
<td>217 25 9</td>
<td>50 8 0</td>
<td>127 13 1</td>
<td>40 24 1</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J12–J18</td>
<td>Pneumonia</td>
<td>103 12 3</td>
<td>25 4 0</td>
<td>66 6 8</td>
<td>12 7 2</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J44</td>
<td>COPD</td>
<td>75 8 9</td>
<td>15 2 4</td>
<td>45 4 6</td>
<td>15 9 0</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J00–J11, J19–J43, J45–J99</td>
<td>Diseases of the respiratory system, excluding pneumonia and COPD</td>
<td>80 9 5</td>
<td>16 2 5</td>
<td>44 4 5</td>
<td>20 12 0</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K00–K93</td>
<td>Diseases of the digestive system</td>
<td>82 9 8</td>
<td>21 3 3</td>
<td>47 4 8</td>
<td>14 8 4</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N00–N89</td>
<td>Diseases of the genitourinary system</td>
<td>100 11 9</td>
<td>32 5 1</td>
<td>52 5 3</td>
<td>16 9 6</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R00–R99</td>
<td>Symptoms, signs and abnormal clinical and laboratory findings, not classified elsewhere</td>
<td>251 29 9</td>
<td>60 9 6</td>
<td>144 14 8</td>
<td>47 28 3</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S00–T98</td>
<td>Injury, poisoning and certain other consequences of external causes</td>
<td>59 7 0</td>
<td>11 1 8</td>
<td>39 4 0</td>
<td>9 5 4</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V01–Y98</td>
<td>External causes of morbidity and mortality</td>
<td>75 8 9</td>
<td>17 2 7</td>
<td>48 4 9</td>
<td>10 6 0</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* Main diagnostic groups according to the ICD-10; subcategories are marked with a bullet.
† Multiple causes of death were analysed; therefore, the column percentage exceeds 100.
‡ Log-rank test between nutritional screening groups.
Malnutrition and cause-specific mortality

We describe baseline characteristics, diagnoses and the Charlson co-morbidity index. These results remained significant after controlling for baseline characteristics, diagnoses and the Charlson co-morbidity index. These data show that malnutrition and risk of malnutrition are important prognostic factors for adults aged ≥65 years, regardless of the cause of death.

**Strengths and limitations of the study**

The major strengths of the present study were its sample size and the length of follow-up. This is the only study so far to examine the relationship between three nutritional screening groups defined by the MNA and cause-specific mortality among older adults admitted to hospital. The prospective study design made it possible to control for a number of co-morbidities and several other participant characteristics recorded at baseline. Furthermore, in the present study, multiple causes of death were analysed – that is, all conditions mentioned on a death certificate, which included both the terminal cause of death and the underlying cause of death. By contrast, the majority of previous studies have analysed the underlying cause of death in relation to malnutrition or BMI. However, older adults may have a complex disease history, and multiple diseases may contribute to the cause of death. For this reason, all conditions specified on a death certificate were analysed, which is considered a strength of the present study.

The limitation with the Swedish Cause of Death Register is that only a minority of deaths are examined by autopsy, which is the most reliable method to confirm the cause of death. In the present study, an autopsy was found to be performed on 63% of the deceased. The least reliable method to examine cause of death is an external examination of the corpse. Fortunately, this was performed only in 11-7% of the deceased. The majority (80-3%) had been examined before they passed away, and the cause-of-death statement was based on this examination. However, in a small percentage of the deceased, the examination for determining cause of death was not stated (1-7%). Another limitation of the present study was that no information was available about when malnutrition had occurred. Hence, it is difficult to know whether the diseases
Table 3. Cause-specific mortality in relation to nutritional screening groups in 1767 older adults  
(Hazard ratios (HR) and 95% confidence intervals)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnostic groups†‡</th>
<th>Malnourished (n 166)*</th>
<th>At risk of malnutrition (n 973)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unadjusted HR 95% CI</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certain infectious and parasitic diseases</td>
<td>3.99 (1.62, 9.79) 0.003</td>
<td>2.15 (0.73, 6.29) 0.163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoplasms</td>
<td>2.84 (1.99, 4.06) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>2.43 (1.54, 3.78) &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Malignant neoplasms of digestive organs</td>
<td>3.08 (1.81, 5.25) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>3.26 (1.61, 6.60) 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases</td>
<td>3.34 (1.25, 4.03) 0.002</td>
<td>2.23 (1.16, 4.30) 0.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases, excluding diabetes</td>
<td>4.73 (1.85, 12.06) 0.013</td>
<td>4.29 (1.35, 13.58) 0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental and behavioural disorders</td>
<td>16.22 (6.15, 42.71) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>5.75 (1.90, 17.28) 0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diseases of the nervous system</td>
<td>6.75 (3.02, 15.07) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>4.93 (1.62, 11.88) 0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diseases of the circulatory system</td>
<td>4.08 (3.01, 5.43) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.95 (1.39, 2.74) &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Ischaemic heart disease</td>
<td>3.04 (1.73, 5.34) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.95 (1.39, 2.75) &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Heart failure</td>
<td>3.48 (2.27, 5.33) 0.005</td>
<td>1.38 (0.83, 2.30) 0.219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Cerebrovascular disease</td>
<td>3.48 (1.20, 6.17) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.69 (0.84, 3.38) 0.141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diseases of the respiratory system</td>
<td>5.16 (3.40, 7.84) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>2.19 (1.30, 3.70) 0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Pneumonia</td>
<td>3.12 (1.66, 5.82) 0.001</td>
<td>2.55 (1.51, 4.31) &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● COPD</td>
<td>6.55 (3.19, 13.44) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.63 (0.88, 3.01) 0.118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diseases of the respiratory system, excluding pneumonia and COPD</td>
<td>7.53 (4.09, 15.36) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>3.33 (2.38, 11.97) &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diseases of the digestive system</td>
<td>3.91 (1.96, 7.72) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>2.11 (0.91, 4.94) 0.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diseases of the genitourinary system</td>
<td>2.97 (1.62, 5.42) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>3.13 (1.93, 5.87) 0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptoms, signs, and abnormal clinical and laboratory findings, not classified elsewhere</td>
<td>5.18 (3.53, 7.60) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>2.33 (1.38, 3.58) 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury, poisoning and certain other consequences of external causes</td>
<td>5.22 (2.16, 12.64) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.98 (0.82, 4.74) 0.688</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External causes of morbidity and mortality</td>
<td>3.59 (1.64, 7.88) 0.001</td>
<td>1.71 (0.67, 4.46) 0.289</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

COPD, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.  
* Reference category is well nourished (n 628).  
† Adjusted for age, sex, BMI, BMI × BMI, current smoking, number of medications, overnight fast >11 h, living situation (lives alone, cohabits or nursing home), diagnoses at baseline and the Charlson co-morbidity index.  
‡ Main diagnostic groups according to the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, Tenth Revision; subcategories are marked with a bullet. Multiple causes of death were analysed.  
§ Adjusted HR with significant associations.
had led to malnutrition or whether malnutrition preceded the
diseases. However, the multivariate Cox regression analyses
remained significant after controlling for the diagnoses and the
Charlson co-morbidity index at baseline. After adjustment for
potential confounders, the association between malnutrition and
death due to certain infectious and parasitic diseases, heart
failure, cerebrovascular disease and disease of digestive system
disappeared. Given the strong reduction in the magnitude of
the effect estimates, it is likely that some of the confounding
factors included in the adjusted regression models explain
this effect.

Comparison with other studies

This is the first study to demonstrate an association between
malnutrition defined by the MNA and cause-specific mortality
among older adults. Previous studies have investigated the
relationship between malnutrition and all-cause mortality(29),
and have concluded that malnutrition can predict preterm
death(14). An Italian study found an association between
malnutrition according to the screening instrument GNRI and
cardiovascular mortality in older adults in long-term care
settings (mean age of 84-6 years)(15), which was slightly older
than the population of the present study. However, no
association between malnutrition assessed with the MNA and
cause-specific mortality was found. One possible explanation
for the differences between these two studies is that our
study had a higher number of deceased participants (n 839)
compared with the Italian study (n 297), and consequently
more events in the other causes of death categories.

BMI is included as an item when screening for malnutrition
with the MNA(2,15), and a low BMI (<22 kg/m²) could be an
indicator of malnutrition. Previous studies have found a U-shaped
relationship between BMI and all-cause mortality(14,28), with an
optimal BMI of 29-6 kg/m² for overall survival(14).

However, the ESPEN guidelines for nutritional screening do
not recommend the use of only a low BMI to detect malnutrition
and survival prospects, because it could lead to massive
underdiagnosis, as the BMI in all populations worldwide is
increasing as a result of the obesity epidemic(1,12). In the present
study, 19-7% of the 1771 participants had a BMI <22 kg/m²,
which is considerably fewer than the 55-1% who were assessed
as risk of malnutrition with the MNA. To assess risk of
malnutrition in older adults, ESPEN guidelines state that BMI in
combination with weight loss and decreased food intake should
be included in all screening instruments(12).

The results of the present study that malnourished participants
had double the risk of respiratory disease mortality is supported
by a study from the UK, which examined cause-specific mortality
in older adults according to BMI in 4862 old- and middle-
aged (40–69 years) male civil servants. Those with the lowest
BMI (<22.7 kg/m²) had double the risk of respiratory disease
death(27). Further, in the present study, malnourished
individuals (mean BMI 21.2 kg/m²) had double the risk of
cardiovascular mortality. On the contrary, in the UK study, those
with the highest BMI (>30.1 kg/m²) had double the risk of
cardiovascular mortality(27). This difference could be explained by
the different populations examined. The present study included
unhealthy older adults, where a high BMI could have a cardio-
protective effect(29). On the contrary, the UK population included
healthy middle-aged people(27), and in this population obesity is
associated with higher risk of CVD(30). Previous studies support
the premise that once a chronic disease of some kind is present,
overweight and even obesity have a protective effect against
mortality. A prospective cohort study of patients with or at high
risk of atherosclerosis (n 285) found that underweight patients
(BMI <18 kg/m²) had the highest risk of both all-cause and
cardiovascular mortality, whereas obese patients (BMI >35 kg/m²)
had the lowest mortality risk at follow-up after 4 years (29). How-
ever, also in healthy older adults (mean age 72 years old), those
with a BMI corresponding to overweight (BMI 25-0–29-9 kg/m²)
had the lowest risk of both all-cause mortality and respiratory,
cardiovascular and cancer mortality(31). This is in line with the
present study, demonstrating increased mortality in all the
aforementioned causes of death in malnourished individuals.

In summary, the present study found an association between
malnutrition and cardiovascular, respiratory and cancer mortality
and further that the association with malnutrition extends to most
cases of death in older adults. These results are supported by
previous studies that have found an association between nutri-
tional risk and cardiovascular mortality(13) and a low BMI and
respiratory disease mortality(27,31), cardiovascular mortality(29,31)
and cancer mortality(31).

Conclusion and clinical implications

The results from the survival analyses clearly demonstrate that,
irrespective of the underlying diseases the individuals have,
malnutrition and risk of malnutrition have profound effects on
survival. The MNA screening instrument could identify those with
worse survival prospects related to malnutrition and risk of
malnutrition, which suggests that this instrument is useful in
clinical practice. Therefore, nutritional screening should be
performed as a routine in all older adults to identify those who
may require nutritional support in order to help avoid preterm
death. Even though it is not yet established which nutritional
intervention is most effective to prevent or treat malnutrition, and
to whom these interventions should be targeted(32,33), the present
study clearly demonstrates that it is important that these
individuals are identified. These results may support further
studies to establish effective interventions against malnutrition in
older adults.

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L. S., A. R., E. T. A. and L. B. participated in the conception and design of the study, interpreted the results and edited the manuscript; L. S. carried out the study; L. S. and A. R. performed the statistical analyses; and L. S. wrote the first draft. All the authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

None of the authors has any conflicts of interest to declare.

References


