

Eating and drinking for a person with dementia



Introduction

People with dementia may experience problems with eating and drinking. There are many reasons this might happen. They might:

- forget to eat or drink
- experience difficulties preparing food or drinks
- have difficulty recognising food items
- have a change in appetite or taste

Eating a healthy and balanced diet is important for a person's physical and mental health. Not eating and drinking enough can increase the risk of dehydration, weight loss, a urinary tract infection and constipation. These health problems can be particularly problematic for someone with dementia as they can increase confusion and the risks of delirium, and sometimes make the symptoms of dementia worse.

Helping a person with dementia to maintain a healthy diet can be difficult for the people caring for them. This leaflet aims to provide some positive tips on ways to help.

It's important to consider the person's likes and dislikes regarding food, however, tastes do change throughout our lives. These changes may be more pronounced for someone with dementia. They may find certain colours, textures or smells off-putting or sometimes eat certain foods they previously wouldn't have. An increasingly sweet-tooth is common. This and other factors may make it more difficult for the person to stick to specific diets such as those for people with diabetes or coeliac disease, or those with religious or cultural needs.

Understanding the person's previous relationship with food, as well as any cultural or religious reasons for avoiding particular food or drink, will be useful.

Poor appetite and weight loss are quite common as dementia progresses. But there are also medical reasons why a person may have lost interest in food and drink, which your GP or perhaps your dentist could advise on. These include:

- depression, which can lead to poor appetite
- mouth pain and dental problems, which can lead to discomfort and a reluctance to eat or drink
- constipation, which can make a person feel full and nauseous
- infections or other physical illness

Setting the scene for mealtimes

A familiar, sociable environment can help a person with dementia to feel more comfortable eating and drinking. You could try:

- turning off noisy TVs and radios, or playing some soothing, familiar music

- being flexible about meal times, avoiding times when the person is tired or distressed
- giving the person lots of time to eat, so there is no rushing
- eating with the person, if they enjoy the social side of this. It might be encouraging for them to see you eating, but bear in mind some people may be self-conscious and embarrassed to eat in company
- making sure the room is well-lit and describing the food. This might help the person recognise the food they are eating more easily
- using plain coloured plates and cups so they can see the food easily. Specially adapted cutlery is available for people with dementia

Encouraging a person with dementia to eat

Involve the person by asking them what they would like to eat. If they struggle to decide, you could give

them two options of simple things you know they like and can manage. If appropriate, you could involve them in the food preparation. You could try:

- offering something easy to eat, that you know the person likes
- giving the person small, regular portions rather than large meals
- being flexible: a person with a sweet tooth might like to eat their dessert first. You could add sweet condiments like ketchup or apple sauce to savoury food
- offering a small snack before a meal to see if that helps the person realise they are hungry
- using different tastes, smells and colours to stimulate the appetite

If someone with dementia is having difficulty swallowing, please seek the advice of a speech and language therapist before considering a diet of pureed or soft food, as this can lack nutrients. You should be able to request a referral from your GP. Your GP can advise you on food to

offer while you wait for a referral, but it's a good idea to keep offering food you know the person likes and can manage.

Encouraging a person with dementia to drink

A person with dementia may not always be able to recognise when they are thirsty, or they might not be able to communicate their thirst. But nevertheless, it is recommended to aim for about eight glasses of fluid per day. You could try:

- having a drink beside the person at all times
- adding a little flavoured squash if the person is not keen on water
- offering a choice of hot and cold drinks
- helping the person if they are struggling to pick up or hold a cup
- offering the person different shapes and sizes of cup
- finding out if they have a favourite mug they like to drink from



Stocking up and storing food

A person with dementia might need help keeping track of what food they have at home and storing food safely. You could try:

- storing food in ways that are easy to access and eat, such as pouring cereals into clear pots or cutting cheese into cubes
- buying frozen ready meals; but be mindful that the person might need help reheating frozen foods safely. You could put labels with clear cooking instructions on the top of the meal. You could put

notes reminding the person that the meals are in the freezer on the freezer door

- checking the person's cupboards and disposing of anything out of date

Weight gain or weight loss

Some of the eating and drinking issues associated with dementia can lead to weight loss. Pureed food is less nutritious, and people with dementia are at risk of malnutrition. In this instance, you could try:

- adding skimmed milk powder to whatever you are serving. Skimmed milk powder is available from most supermarkets
- mixing skimmed milk powder with milkshake powder, such as Nesquik. These are fortified with vitamins and mixing them creates a high nutrient drink

It is important to note that there is different nutrition and healthy eating advice for people with dementia.

For most people, the standard advice is to follow a low fat, low sugar diet. But older people and those with dementia especially need higher nutrients.

People with frontotemporal dementia might be especially drawn to sweet things or starchy foods. If overeating or weight gain is an issue, you could try:

- serving food in a portion rather than bringing out the packet
- replacing sweet or high calorie foods with healthier alternatives such as fruit or low calorie jelly



- encouraging the person to become more active, by taking walks or swimming, or seated exercises for people with mobility issues
- storing food away from the person's line of sight so they aren't tempted

Sources of support

- For more information on healthy eating, see NHS Choices www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/Healthyeating.aspx
- For advice on dental health, mouth care and dementia, see our leaflet www.dementiauk.org/mouth-care
- For utensils and eating aids for people with dementia www.unforgettable.org
- More advice for carers www.carersuk.org
- NHS Choices Malnutrition www.nhs.uk/conditions/malnutrition/
- Nutrition & Diet Resource (2017) 'Eating well with Dementia: A carers' guide' www.ndr-uk.org/item/19/Dementia/Eating-Well-with-Dementia.html
- Bournemouth University resource 'Eating and Drinking Well: Supporting People Living with Dementia' www.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/centres-institutes/ageing-dementia-research-centre/eating-drinking-well-dementia-toolkit
- Free BDA Food Facts Sheets www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/home

The information in this booklet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses.

We are always looking to improve our resources, to provide the most relevant support for families living with dementia. If you have feedback about any of our leaflets, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

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If you're caring for someone with dementia or if you have any other concerns or questions, call or email our Admiral Nurses for specialist support and advice.



Call **0800 888 6678** or email helpline@dementiauk.org

Open Monday – Friday, 9am – 9pm
Saturday and Sunday, 9am – 5pm

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