

Dementia care team

# Helping someone with dementia to eat

Information for patients, relatives and carers

**Remember to ask for your high energy and high protein diet booklet too.**

## Introduction

Sometimes people with dementia can experience difficulties with eating and drinking and this can make it very stressful for both them and their carer at mealtimes.

This guide provides you with useful tips for helping your relative/friend to eat well and stay healthy for as long as possible.

It is important to remember that dementia affects different people in different ways. Therefore, you might have to try out various approaches before you find one that works.

## Common difficulties

Some of the reasons why people with dementia have difficulty eating and drinking are:

- they forget that they have already eaten or think that they have eaten a meal when they have not
- they have difficulty remembering how to prepare food
- their tastes change – people with dementia often prefer sweeter or spicier foods
- they might keep chewing food and forget to swallow, or hold the food in their mouth and not chew or swallow it

- there might be problems with the consistency of the food – as a person’s illness progresses, they can develop problems with swallowing
- they might also have difficulty eating harder foods because of problems with their teeth
- they might not remember how to use cutlery or might not recognise what the objects are
- they might misinterpret what they are looking at and eat non-edible items within reach
- they will often lose their appetite

You can use the mealtime memo on page 4 to remind you of the important points to remember when helping your relative/friend.



## Mealtime memo

**M** **Make** my position comfortable and make sure I am not in pain

**E** **Everybody** is different - find out what I like

**A** **Appetising** smells and presentation help me enjoy my food

**L** **Let** me feed myself if possible, but help me if I need it

**T** **Tell** me what I am eating and go at my pace

**I** **I like** a calm environment without clutter, clatter and chatter

**M** **Modify** the consistency to suit me

**E** **Eat** with me when you can

## Before eating

Mealtimes will work better if you:

- encourage your relative/friend to go to the toilet before the meal
- allow the person to smell the food if possible as smell will improve appetite
- make sure they are sitting upright and are alert
- ensure the person is in a position where the food is easy to see and reach
- use coloured plates to serve the food - the contrast will help them to distinguish different types of food
- remove everything else from the table to avoid distraction and eating of non-food items
- do not use patterned table cloths as they can be distracting
- try to eat with your relative or friend, even if you are just having a snack. People tend to eat more when eating socially
- have music playing - the sound of music can stimulate appetite

## Mealtime

Try to encourage your relative/friend to eat independently for as long as possible, even if it takes longer than feeding them.

- if possible, give them a menu or put written labels by the food to help understanding
- serve one course at a time, so there is nothing other than the plate in front of them
- put small portions on the plate – big portions can be off-putting (you can always give seconds)
- try to minimise distractions at mealtimes
- talk about the food you are serving using the names of each item as they might not recognise the food and naming it can trigger recognition
- remember that they might not know what to do, so you can gently prompt them to use the cutlery, chew and swallow (say the word 'swallow' or 'chew the food')
- if they are holding food in their mouth, offer a cold, fizzy or strong lemon flavoured drink as this will encourage them to swallow
- even if they drop or spill food, do not take over - try to let them continue unaided
- try not to draw attention to spillages and accidents as this can be upsetting and might discourage them from trying to continue

- if they cannot manage, try using a spoon instead or support their arm/hand (see below). Where possible, avoid putting food directly into the person's mouth unless it is absolutely necessary (this is because the action of bringing your own hand to your mouth stimulates swallowing)
- allow plenty of time for them to finish the meal

Here are two useful ways to support your relative/friend when eating and drinking:



## Drinking

Some people with dementia will have difficulty drinking – below there are some simple tips to support drinking:

- offer a lightweight beaker to drink from (it might be a good idea to use a lid if the person spills a large amount)
- try to avoid clear cups/glasses as the person will struggle to see this

- offer a straw if the person cannot manage with a cup/beaker
- avoid drinking a large amount 30 minutes before a meal as this will reduce appetite
- if a person is losing weight, try substituting full fat milk for water

## What if my relative or friend will not sit down?

Some people with dementia like to walk around and it can be difficult to get them to sit down for long enough to eat a meal. It is particularly important to encourage them to eat as they burn up lots of calories when they are pacing and can lose weight if they are not eating.

Some tips are:

- try leaving out snacks in the areas where they walk
- you can provide a bum bag or snack box with favourite foods in that they can carry around
- give them a selection of snacks or finger food that can be held in the hand – there is a chart on page 11 with some ideas of finger foods for different meals
- if there is a time when they are more settled, try offering food then
- check that they are not walking around because they are uncomfortable, in pain or need the toilet



## What if my relative or friend will only eat sweet foods?

It can be difficult to ensure a healthy diet if there is a strong desire for sweet food. You can sweeten savoury dishes in the following ways:

- use sweeter vegetables, such as carrots, sweet corn, parsnips, sweet potato or peas
- add a small amount of honey to hot vegetables
- sweeten casseroles with dried fruit, like apricots
- use sweet sauces (sweet and sour, ketchup)
- use sweetener if the person is gaining weight

## My relative or friend keeps cramming food into their mouth

Some people with dementia will over-fill their mouth and keep adding food before swallowing. Try cutting food up differently and prompting the person to swallow.

## Changes in taste

People can experience a change in the foods they like. This can be due to a change in the way flavours are recognised as well as a reduction in the number of taste buds. Some suggestions are:

- keep an open mind and try different things

- keep a record of the foods the person has enjoyed
- try adding additional flavours such as garlic, chilli, herbs and Worcestershire sauce to meals to increase flavour
- offer sauces, vinegar and relishes as well

## Finger food ideas

This chart shows the types of finger foods you can use for different mealtimes.



### Breakfast

- Cereal bars
- Teacakes
- Whole mushrooms
- Dried or fresh fruit (in small pieces)
- Toast
- Boiled eggs
- Tomato quarters
- Bread roll



### Lunch and Dinner

- Chicken drumsticks
- Kebabs
- Crab sticks
- Cup of soup
- Chips
- Quartered sandwiches
- Scotch eggs
- Meatballs
- Mini quiche
- Pizza slices
- Salad vegetable sticks
- Bread rolls
- New potatoes



### Dessert

- Ice cream in a cone
- Ice lolly
- Mini Fruit pie
- Fruit kebabs



### Snacks

- Toast
- Dried or fresh fruit
- Biscuits
- Vegetable sticks
- Small cakes or buns
- Malt loaf

## Common health problems which affect eating and drinking

### **Tooth or mouth problems**

It is really important to keep taking your relative or loved one to the dentist and to maintain a healthy mouth. A sore mouth and toothache will stop them from eating. Some tips are:

- continue to help them brush their teeth twice a day
- if they have limited ability, try an electric toothbrush
- a small glass of milk or cube of cheese after a sugary snack can help neutralise acid
- encourage them to drink sugary drinks or high calorie supplements in one go rather than sip them slowly
- if they have dentures, check their mouth regularly to make sure they fit well and are not rubbing
- raise any concerns with the dentist so they can be dealt with promptly

### **Constipation**

Constipation is a common problem for people with dementia and it can increase confusion and agitation, as well as reduce appetite. To prevent constipation:

- ensure the person is drinking enough fluid (1.5– 2 litres/4 pints per day) and remember that this can include jellies, smoothies and yoghurts as well as drinks)
- add extra vegetables to meals and try beans and pulses
- offer desserts with fruit in them
- offer snacks such as high fibre cereal bars and bananas
- use wholemeal breads and cereals such as Weetabix®, Shreddies®, porridge or Bran Flakes®



## Further information

For more information about eating and drinking in dementia please visit the websites below:

1. The Alzheimer's Society factsheet – *Eating and drinking*, which is free to download [www.alzheimers.org.uk](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk)

2. Age UK – *Healthy eating: Your guide to eating well* is free to download and you can find it in: Health and Wellbeing publications - go to the healthy eating section of the website [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)
3. Caroline Walker Trust – *Eating Well: Supporting Older People and Older People with Dementia*, which is free to download [www.cwt.org.uk](http://www.cwt.org.uk)

This page is for you to make any notes you want to or jot down any questions you would like to ask.

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## How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at [imperial.pals@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.pals@nhs.net). The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to express your concerns in **writing** to:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street, London W2 1NY.

## Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print, as a sound recording, in Braille, or in alternative languages. Please contact the communications team on **020 3312 5592**.

## Wi-fi

We have a free wi-fi service for basic filtered browsing and a premium wi-fi service (requiring payment) at each of our five hospitals. Look for WiFiSPARK\_FREE or WiFiSPARK\_PREMIUM

Dementia care team  
Published: March 2024  
Review date: March 2027  
Reference no: 2534



