

WAYS TO ENCOURAGE EATING

- **Encouragement to drink**

People with dementia may not be aware when they are thirsty so you will need to encourage them to drink liquids. Just placing a drink in front of them doesn't mean they will drink it. Describe the drink and where it is so if they have a sight problem they know where to find it. Offer a variety of drinks such as squash/water served in jugs, tea, coffee, hot chocolate, ice lollies, and foods with high water content such as melon and jelly.

- **Eating little and often**

Provide small portions, and then offer seconds rather than large portions which can seem overwhelming and put a person off even attempting to eat the meal. Try looking at 4 or 5 small dishes that can be eaten throughout the day.

- **Healthy Meals**

People living with dementia should be able to enjoy food and can aim to have a healthy and balanced diet by eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, basing meals on starch foods and having 2 portions of fish per week (as recommended for general public) Examples of balanced meals include:

- Porridge made with full fat milk plus fruit such as sliced banana or berries
- Vegetable or lentil soup with added cream and a bread roll
- Mini quiche, scotch egg or fish cakes with potato wedges and salad
- Mini portions of cottage pie, or fish pie with vegetables
- Small cheese omelette or scrambled egg with grilled tomato

Tastes can change as dementia develops and stronger flavours are preferred. Try using mild spices and flavour enhancers such as herbs, stronger cheese and marmite.

If a person has a sweet tooth, try and encourage sweet foods that are also nutritious such as

- apple pie or fruit cake with a piece of cheese
- Chopped banana or baked apple with custard
- Rice pudding with berries or other fruit



ENCOURAGING EATING DURING THE EARLIER STAGES OF DEMENTIA

Try to make meal times as relaxed as possible. Avoid background noise or distractions such as television or the radio, although sometimes soft music can be helpful for relaxation.

If the person lives alone, you might phone and remind the person to eat. Or, if you have called in earlier, leave necessary items out in clear view with full step-by-step instructions. Also, arranging to eat with the person can remind them it is mealtime.

Frozen or pre-prepared meals may be an option if the person lives on their own and has difficulty preparing meals. Suppliers are available in most areas (i.e. Apetito) and from supermarkets. Hidden or uneaten meals are a sign the person needs additional support.

Assist and prompt rather than doing everything for them. The aim is to keep people independent and avoid diminishing their sense of personal control. Be creative and look for ways to involve them in finding solutions rather than taking over.

Talk about the food, prompt and draw attention to things they have not eaten. 'Is the gravy too thick?', 'Are the roast potatoes just how you like them?', 'You haven't eaten your cabbage, I thought it was your favourite vegetable', or 'Your tea is getting cold.' This helps to focus their attention on the food.

Keep to the person's normal meals and eating routine as far as you can. This makes it predictable and helps the person feel relaxed and more in control.

TIPS AS DEMENTIA PROGRESSES

Avoid offering too many food choices or having too many items on the table. Flowers and other decorative items may look nice, but can be confusing for the person with dementia: Put out only what is needed.

Make sure the room in which the person eats is well lit, without too many shadows anywhere. Also, avoid bright glare. This helps with poor sight. If visual perception is troubled by hallucinations or the person does not recognise food for what it is, talking to them about it may help. For example, a mushroom could be mistaken for a slug! Make allowances as needed.

Before the meal, make sure the person does not need the toilet.

Posture is important in the swallowing process. The optimum posture is in an upright chair, ensuring a straight back and level chin, facing forward. Although this is not always possible you may be able to put recliner chairs into an upright position. Avoid the head being tilted back or the neck being extended forward as this can affect the ability to swallow.

If the person is awake during the night then you could offer night-time finger snacks. This helps retain weight when the person only eats small portions. You might also leave some pieces of fruit out for them to snack on, such as grapes, chopped bananas or tangerines.

Sensory difficulties may develop. The person may lose the ability to judge the temperature of food so make sure it is not too hot.

If the person refuses to eat food or spits it out, it could be because it is too hot, or they are uncertain what to do with it. They may feel rushed, dislike the food, feel uncomfortable in the environment or not want assistance with eating. If the person is unable to find the words to communicate the problem, make eye contact and watch their body language for clues. If they show signs of becoming agitated don't pressure them. Wait until they are calm before offering more food.

If the person overfills their mouth try using a smaller spoon. They might also add more food before swallowing. Give a gentle reminder to

swallow and keep the next mouthful out of reach until they are ready. Watch the neck to catch the swallow movement.

It may be necessary to physically prompt the individual to start eating. You might place your hand over theirs on the fork and guide it to their mouth. Once initiated in this way the person may continue eating.

If difficulty with swallowing or chewing begins, initially try soft foods such as scrambled eggs or mince dishes before moving on to pureed food. If it is necessary to start using pureed food, ask the doctor for a referral to a speech and language therapist or dietician for advice to ensure that it is sufficiently nutritious and guidance to help with swallowing.

If a person puts non-food items in their mouth they may be confusing it for food. Remove the item from view and offer food instead. It is a good idea to have food which is easy to see (contrasts with the colour of the plate) available throughout the day so they can eat when they feel hungry.

A person may develop difficulties with coordination and have problems using a knife and fork and getting the food from the plate to their mouth. They may need reminding to open their mouth as food approaches. They may also feel embarrassed. Solutions could be to:

- Enable the person to eat somewhere they feel comfortable
- Chop up the food so it can be eaten with a spoon
- Offer finger foods such as sandwiches, quiche, hard boiled eggs or sausages that are easy to pick up by hand
- Obtain specially adapted cutlery and non-spill cups. An occupational therapist can advise on what is available and suitable.

This guidance has been extracted from the following sources: Alzheimer's Society, carewatch.co.uk, Bournemouth university. For references or further information please contact the dementia advice service on 01252 624808 or by email dementiaadvicehartushmoor@andovermind.org.uk

