

Late Stages of Dementia

Dementia is an incurable disease that gets worse over time.

Sadly in the later stages, there aren't any treatments to make the condition better. Treatment is now focussed on making people as comfortable as possible.

As the dementia progresses people may become less interested in eating, because of this they often lose weight. As they get less energy and vitamins from food, people are more at risk from infections and damage to their skin from laying in bed more of the time.

The swallowing problems get worse, and the risk of food getting into the lungs increases. When it does, it can cause an infection: called **aspiration pneumonia**. This may be treated with antibiotic but is likely to recur. It may be that after a discussion with the medical teams antibiotics are not prescribed, but instead a palliative approach is taken.

Often, families and doctors agree to accept the risk of aspiration pneumonia, and allow the person with dementia to continue eating if they want to. This is often called **comfort feeding**.

Feeding people with dementia through tubes put into the stomach down the nose (nasogastric tube) or by an operation through the abdomen (PEG tube) has been tried, but there are complications such as infections and diarrhoea. Long term tube-feeding hasn't been shown to improve wellbeing or prolong life and because of this, it is not generally advised in the UK in later stages of dementia.

However during an acute admission after discussion with the medical team an NGT may be inserted for a short period of time (1 -2 weeks) to give medication and food while an acute reversible infection is treated. This decision would be made depending on the individual's circumstance and their type of dementia. The plan would be documented clearly in the notes.

Eating and Drinking for Patients in the Later Stages of Dementia



Introduction

Eating is a complicated process. We must realise when we are hungry, recognise food and know that it is edible. We must understand that we need to chew and swallow mouthfuls. The swallowing mechanism is controlled by our brains and involves the coordination of many different nerves and muscles working together.

Any or all of these things can be damaged by dementia.

How Dementia Can Affect Eating

Having dementia affects each person differently. Some or all of these problems can be true for different people at different stages of the disease:

Senses

Older people experience changes in their senses of smell and taste, and often don't enjoy food as much. This problem can be worse in dementia.

Swallowing

The nerves and muscles controlling swallowing may not work together as well as they once did.

Changes in Behaviour

People with dementia often need to be reminded to continue eating and to swallow mouthfuls. They might keep food in their mouth or cheeks, or they may refuse food or resist help with feeding. They may also develop unusual thoughts about food, for example they might think it has been poisoned. They might also be easily distracted at meal times.

Tips and Advice for Eating and Drinking in Dementia

1. Finger food

If a person finds it hard to feed themselves, try different foods that can be picked up and eaten such as chopped fruit, vegetables, cocktail sausages, chocolate or pieces of cheese.

2. Variety

As people's tastes can change, try experimenting with different flavours, textures and temperatures. Some people with dementia can start to enjoy foods they didn't use to like. Ice cream may stimulate a swallow.

3. Little and often

People with dementia may have changes to their appetite. They may prefer smaller portions and benefit from smaller meals, but offered more often during the day. Some might prefer eating at different times, for example earlier in the day.

4. Extra time

As dementia progresses, people often need more help with eating. They will often need somebody to feed them by hand. A calm environment can help. Try to reduce distractions, and plan for the extra time that meals will take.

5. Drinks

Offer drinks throughout the day.