

Department of Nutrition and Dietetics

A practical guide for carers: Supporting eating and drinking for those with Dementia

Understanding reasons for a poor appetite

Each person is affected differently by dementia and changes in eating and drinking habits can also vary. These difficulties can result in **weight loss** and **deteriorating health**.

Below are some of the reasons why a person with dementia might have **difficulty eating** and/or **drinking** and/or **declining** food or fluids:

Depression

Can lead to a loss of appetite. When someone begins to realise they have dementia this may cause feelings of upset, despair and loneliness.

Difficulties chewing and or swallowing

These can become difficult as dementia advances. It is advisable to discuss the swallow assessment with the GP if this becomes a problem.

Changes in food preferences

The person you are caring for may begin to prefer tastes unusual for them e.g. sweet or spicy foods.

Limited recognition of hunger or thirst

The person you are caring for may think they have already eaten or had a drink. This may result in a decrease in food and fluid intake. The opposite may also happen where they forget that they have eaten and want to eat another meal.

Communication

Some people with dementia may struggle to communicate their preferences and may simply stop eating because of this.

Co-ordination

Co-ordination problems can make mealtimes challenging resulting in a poor intake.

How to stimulate an interest in food

Making small changes to **encourage, stimulate** and **motivate** the person you are caring for to eat are very important.

First, you need to find out **what** the person likes and **how much** they can manage, then you can consider the following tips:

- Ensure food looks **appetising** by using a variety of **colourful** foods e.g. a bowl of chopped fruit.
- Try **not** to overload the plate. Instead, offer **small portions**.
- Use contrasting **coloured plates** in **red, yellow** or **blue** (primary colours). This makes food easier to see.
- Ensure the eating area is well lit as this will help people to see what is on their plate.
- Provide **one course at a time**. Use plate warmers or a microwave to re-heat food throughout the meal.
- Be **flexible** with eating times. Offer small meals and snacks regularly during the day. If food is often refused offer small amounts every hour.
- Have **conversations about food** before the meal e.g. favourite meals, pictures of food and reminisce about meals. **Involvement** in the preparation of a meal or laying the table can help remind someone it is time to eat.

How to prepare for a meal

Preparing someone for a meal is **very important**. Preparation can **reduce stress** or **anxiety**, making mealtimes much more **enjoyable**.

Some tips on how to prepare for a meal are outlined below:

- **Encourage** the person to **use the toilet** before the meal. This will prevent any breaks during the meal.
- **Be aware of noise** as some individuals may not like a noisy dining area, others may prefer favourite background music.
- Ensure the person is **wearing** any glasses, dentures or hearing aids if they have them.
- If required, make sure any **adapted crockery** or **cutlery** is **in place** e.g. chunky cups/cutlery for those struggling to grip standard sized versions, high rimmed plates to avoid spillages.
- **Remove** any **distracting objects** from the meal table e.g. vases or excessive amounts of condiments.
- Try **not** to use **patterned table coverings** where possible, as this can **cause a distraction**.

During mealtimes

- Sit person with relatives/carers to promote the social side of eating so that relatives/carers can set an example or model for the confused or forgetful person.
- Maximise good times of the day (typically breakfast and lunchtime) to provide foods which are good sources of nutrients and energy.
- Hand-over-hand assistance can be useful for people who are having difficulty in coordinating cutlery i.e. gently place the utensil in the person's hand and use your hand to guide them to start eating.
- If a person with dementia gets distracted during the meal or sits passively in front of the meal without eating, gentle verbal prompts can be useful.

- If a person with dementia walks away from an unfinished meal, be wary of assuming the person has finished or dislikes the food.
- People may need some verbal prompts to come back to the table, and gesturing to the chair next to you can show the person what you mean.

Finger Foods and Nourishing Drinks

If the person you are caring for is unsettled and struggling to eat plated meals or use cutlery then **finger foods** are an alternative option. These are a great way to **maintain independence** and **improve self-esteem**. **Nourishing drinks** provide **essential nutrients** vital for good health. These alternatives can be useful for a person who is always on the move.

Here are some examples of the **different types** of finger foods and nourishing drinks to consider. Some of the ideas may also be useful for snacks between meals.

Breads and cereals:

(use a variety of breads e.g. wholemeal/white)

- Buttered toast/bread fingers
- Soft cereal bars
- Slices of fruitcake
- Scones/ teacakes/ malt-loaf with butter, jam or honey
- Sandwiches (cut into small squares)

Meat, fish and vegetarian:

- Chicken breast, cut into pieces
- Chipolatas, meatballs, hotdogs, falafels
- Meat or Vegetarian burger/sausages
- Small fishcakes, crabsticks and fish fingers
- Cheese cubes/miniature cheeses
- Mini quiche, small pork pie, sausage roll, small scotch egg
- Vegetable samosa, onion bhaji
- Hard boiled egg

Fruit and vegetables:

(can be served steamed, boiled or raw)

- Slices or sticks of cucumber/carrot/celery
- Broccoli/cauliflower florets
- Slices of apple/pear/kiwi fruit/peaches
- Seedless grapes
- Strawberries or raspberries

Pudding or sweet snacks:

- Sponge pudding cut into chunks
- Mini fruit pie, egg custard tart, jam tart
- Small cake, bun or American muffin
- Pancake rolled with filling e.g. peanut butter or chocolate spread
- Small cookies or biscuits

Nourishing drinks:

(use insulated cups with lids for hot drinks)

- Milk-based drinks e.g. hot chocolate, latte, milkshakes or malted drinks
- Fresh fruit juices e.g. orange, apple, cranberry
- Readymade yoghurt drinks

How to add extra energy and protein

This can be a **challenge**, especially if the person you are caring for is only **eating small amounts**. It can be beneficial to fortify food in order to **add extra energy** and **protein**. Below are some ways to do this:

- Add **extra butter, cheese** or **cream** to meals e.g. add to potatoes, soups and sauces
- Generous use of **spreads** such as **jam, honey, lemon curd, marmalade or peanut butter** on bread, scones and pancakes
- Add **extra sugar** to puddings, cereal and hot drinks
- Use **full fat milk** or **cream** on cereal and in drinks

- Add a few **teaspoons** of **jam, syrup, lemon curd** or **honey to milk pudding**
- Offer **snacks between meals** e.g. crackers with butter and cheese, cakes, chocolate

What to do if the person I care for is overeating

A person with dementia will sometimes **forget they have eaten**, which can often be **distressing**. This also means **weight** can be **difficult to control**. Here are some tips on how you can help reduce the risks of overeating:

- Divide the original meal into **two smaller portions** and heat the second when required
- Serve a **small portion** of the **main dish** (fish, meat or vegetarian option) with **starchy foods** (potatoes, rice, pasta) and then **fill the plate with vegetables** or **salad**.
- Offer **healthy snacks** e.g. fruit or low fat yoghurt

What to do if fluids are a problem

In order to keep well hydrated **about 8 –10 cups (1.5 –2 litres) of fluid** should be consumed each day. On hot days or if the person has an infection then encourage an extra 1-2 cups of fluid.

Poor hydration can cause **urinary infections, constipation, confusion and tiredness**. To reduce the risks of dehydration consider the following:

- Offer **small amounts** of fluid **frequently** e.g. half or 3/4 of a cup at a time
- Use **flavoured** ice-cubes
- **Placing the cup in the persons hand** to prompt them to drink
- Keep fluids **varied** e.g. soups, fruit juice, tea, milk, coffee, etc
- Place a jug or bottle **in view** of the person so it **can be seen**
- Use **coloured cups** or put **coloured fluids** in a clear glass

What do if constipation is a problem

It is important to **encourage good bowel health** as constipation can **reduce appetite** and contribute to **increased confusion**. In order to ensure the person you care for has healthy bowels you can consider the following:

- Include **extra fruit and vegetables**.
This includes side-salads, stewed fruit and chopped fruit with cereal
- Use **wholemeal bread** and **wholegrain cereals**
- Have soups containing **beans** and **lentils**
- Ensure a **good fluid intake** (see above).

The Trust cannot accept any responsibility for the accuracy of the information given if the leaflet is not used by RD&E staff undertaking procedures at the RD&E hospitals.

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