
Tips for assisting eating and drinking for people with dementia

Eating a healthy and balanced diet is important for the physical and mental wellbeing of someone with dementia. People with dementia can experience problems with eating and drinking. Medical conditions such as depression, a urinary tract infection, constipation, pain due to problems with dentures, sore gums, or painful teeth may also be putting them off their food and drink. Symptoms of dementia, like communication and co-ordination issues, recognising hunger, or chewing and swallowing difficulties could be inhibiting their appetite too.

Importantly, a problem with eating or drinking is unique to that person, so consider that a person's beliefs, culture, life history, routines, preferences and needs to help find a solution tailored to them. It's also about positively encouraging them to eat and drink with gentle reminders, while enabling them to retain as much independence as possible.

Concentration issues could be tiring the person out and making them feel the mealtime has gone on for too long. Try **finger foods**, or **smaller portions and snacks**, on a more regular basis to make the task easier and so the food doesn't go cold.

If food goes cold it will lose its appeal so it may help to **serve half portions to keep food warm**. However, remember to test food so it's not too hot as someone with dementia may not be able to judge this.

Motor problems could be causing the person to struggle with using cutlery, cutting food up, and picking up glasses or mugs. Check that the person's **cup or glass isn't too heavy or a difficult shape to grasp** and look into getting **adapted non-spill cups and cutlery**.

Ensure the person is **sitting upright** and well positioned to eat food and help them to guide their food to their mouth. Certain foods that can be eaten with their hands will make eating food more enjoyable, like slices of fruit, sausages, sandwiches, and cheese.

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Soft and moist food that needs minimal chewing works well, so avoid hard vegetables and focus on food like mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs, stewed fruits, milkshakes or smoothies. And, foods that are heavy in fluid, like gravy, jelly and ice cream are easy to eat and can help with hydration.

If the person with dementia has limited vision they may have trouble seeing what their food is, so **explain what the food is** on their plate to help them to visualise what they are eating before they try it.

With drinks, offer the person the cup in their **line of sight** as this will help them know it is there and describe the drink to them.

Well lit rooms will help the person to see the food better.

People who have dementia may find their **food tastes change** and they could begin to like unusual combinations of sweet and savoury food, or develop a fondness for sweet food. If the person doesn't eat their savoury meal don't withhold dessert as they may prefer dessert as it is sweet, but have a healthy dessert like fruit. On savoury food you could try using sweet sauces, chutney or a small amount of honey or sugar to make the food taste sweeter.

The environment is important for someone with dementia so this should be considered when they are eating and drinking. Let them decide where they would **like to sit and eat**, switch off **background noise** so there's no distraction and it's **calm and relaxing**.

Try to make mealtimes a **social activity** – by eating with the person with dementia it will encourage interaction and they may copy what you do when you eat and drink.

Senses – like taste, smell and sight – play an important role in making food appetising and appealing, so try foods that taste different, smell aromatic, and are full of colour.

Avoid putting food on patterned plates as this can be confusing and **use different colours for the food, plate and table** as the contrasting colours will help the person to identify what everything is.

A clear glass will help the person to see what is inside and colourful cups will grasp someone's attention. Try and encourage at least 6-7 cups of fluid a day. The use of **a straw** or **a cup with two handles** can enable the person to remain independent when drinking.

If you have any questions regarding this information please contact the Speech & Language Therapy Team on **0151 604 7271** or email **wchc.salt@nhs.net**

If you would like this information in another format or language, please contact the Your Experience Team on freephone 0800 694 5530. Alternatively you can email wcnt.yourexp@nhs.net

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