



EATING

If you are caring for someone with dementia you will want to ensure that they enjoy their food and that they eat a healthy, balanced diet. But for some people, as dementia progresses, mealtimes become stressful. Here are some suggestions.

A calm, regular routine is reassuring for a person with dementia. Meals should be relaxed, unhurried occasions. Try to allow plenty of time for eating and to ensure that there are no distractions. Changes in eating habits often take place as dementia progresses.

Poor appetite

There are several reasons why a person with dementia may have a poor appetite and seem uninterested in eating.

- In the early stages of dementia some people lose interest in food because they are depressed.
- Depression is very common and is quite understandable. There are effective drug treatments for depression, so if you suspect that this is the problem consult a GP. When the depression lifts the person's appetite should return.
- They may think they have already eaten
- There may be problems with badly fitting dentures or sore gums. Both of these problems will make eating uncomfortable. In this case ask a dentist to check.
- Poor oral hygiene.
- If a person is not very active during the day they may not feel hungry.
- Physical activity and exercise should be encouraged.
- In the later stages of dementia people may no longer be able to understand that the food in front of them is there to be eaten, even if they are clearly hungry. This is because the nerve pathways in the brain are damaged and the message is not getting through. You may need to keep reminding them to eat or even to guide the food to their mouth.
- Chewing and swallowing can become a problem as dementia advances. If this seems to be the case the advice of a speech therapist may be useful. You can contact one through a GP.
- If the person is living on their own you may find that they are not eating the food that you have provided. They may start hiding food. Meals delivered will no longer be helpful because they may forget to eat the meal delivered.
- These are signs that the person needs more help. It is possible to arrange for home carers to visit the person at mealtimes and either prepare a meal or stay with them while they eat.
- Chronic diseases such as intestinal related and diabetes can all cause poor appetite.

4th Floor, 79 Roeland Street (Corner Harrington & Roeland Str), Cape Town
Tel [+27 21 421-0077](tel:+27214210077) / 78 Fax [+27 21 418-2772](tel:+27214182772) Email: info@dementiasa.org
www.dementiasa.org

National Helpline: 0860 MEMORY / 0860 636 679
049-191 NPO PBO 930022142



Overeating

Sometimes a person with dementia may eat far more food than they require. This is due to changes in the brain caused by the condition and is often only a temporary phase.

In some cases, overeating is explained by memory loss. The person may completely forget that they have eaten – even if they have just done so.

If a person is eating excessive amounts you will want to try to limit their food intake; otherwise, they will be in danger of becoming very uncomfortable after eating or may put on a great deal of weight.

People with dementia often seem to prefer to eat carbohydrates and sweet foods. It may be that their tastes have changed and they find these comforting. However, it is important for a person's health that they eat a balanced diet.

Sometimes a person with dementia seems compelled to search out and consume any type of food. You will need to be aware if this is a problem because, apart from overeating, the person may eat or drink unsuitable or even dangerous substances that may resemble food or liquids stored in cool drink bottles, e.g. paraffin.

- Put anything that you do not wish to be consumed out of sight or out of reach.
- Try to distract the person's attention or find a satisfying activity as a substitute for eating.
- If the person constantly seeks out food, try to provide non-fattening snacks such as fruit or raw vegetables.

Maintaining independence

It is very important to encourage the person to feed themselves for as long as possible. Table manners may deteriorate because they are forgotten or because problems with co-ordination develop. You will need to be flexible and tolerant.

- Try to change your own behaviour and to concentrate on the needs of the person with dementia. This means that you must try not to worry about the mess. Use commonsense measures such as plastic tablecloths, paper napkins to protect clothing and bowls instead of plates.
- An occupational therapist (OT) can advise on eating aids such as non-slip mats, plates with suction pads so that they do not slide around and cutlery with easy-grip handles. You can contact an OT through GPs, a Clinic or Community Health Centre.

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- If a person finds cutlery difficult to handle, provide finger foods such as small sandwiches with nutritious fillings. This may also be more appropriate for people who become restless and are no longer able to sit at the table for a whole meal.

Other problems with eating

Problems with eating are common with people suffering from dementia. For example, the person may refuse to open their mouth, they may not open their mouth unless they are reminded to do so; they may accept food but not swallow it, or they may accept food and then spit it out.

They may resist the person who is trying to feed them and push them away, they may throw food or turn their head away. These reactions may be due to discomfort in the mouth or as a result of damage to the brain. They are not signs that the person is determined to annoy you or being deliberately difficult. Check the mouth to make sure the food is swallowed.

If you have to feed the person, try putting the food into their hand and guiding it to their mouth, involving them in the process of eating. Never try to feed when agitated or when they are lying down as there is a danger of choking. Watch body position and learn to do the Heimlich manoeuvre.

A healthy diet

It is important to encourage the person to eat a balanced diet. They may become more confused or ill if they are lacking certain essential nutrients. Consult a GP, Clinic or Community Health Centre if this is a problem. The GP, Clinic or Community Health Centre may decide to prescribe vitamins or other dietary supplements.

During the later stages some people develop a taste for specific foods. Foods with strong flavour are surprisingly popular at this stage. This has a basis in the physical damage to the brain.

Constipation is a common problem, especially in the later stages of a person's dementia and can increase confusion. Ensure that the person eats a fibre-rich diet and drinks plenty of fluids. If constipation seems a particularly severe problem, consult your community health clinic or GP.

In the late stages of dementia weight loss is a normal symptom, but we do not yet know why.

If the person is not at this advanced stage but is losing weight, you may need to consult your GP. If they are very restless and physically agitated they may be using more energy than the calories they are consuming, or there may be a medical problem.

Tips

- Give simple prompts and cues.

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- Reduce distractions
- Elaborate meals are not essential. It is probably better to devote your energy to ensuring that the person eats enough and enjoys their food.
- You may find that frequent small meals or nutritious snacks are more tempting for a person who is restless or who has a poor appetite.
- The taste of food is affected by dementia. You may need to offer sauces and salt and pepper, which the person did not use before. However, you will have to remove them if the person uses them excessively.
- Make sure that food and drinks are not at too hot a temperature – people with dementia may lose the ability to judge temperature.
- Encourage the person to drink enough liquid each day. Too little liquid can lead to dehydration which, apart from anything else, will make the person more confused. A rough guide is at least eight medium size cups of liquid a day
- Be sensible with textures eg. use soft purees, bite size pieces.
- Just casually put a snack or drink in their hand.
- Remember their likes and dislikes.
- Distract and return to eat later if needed to avoid anxiety.
- Avoid too many distractions at mealtimes. Serve food on plain plates and make sure that tablecloths/ placemats are plain as well.

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