

Eating well with dementia

People with dementia may struggle to eat well for many reasons. It is common for people with dementia to experience changes in appetite along with memory loss and physical changes.

Hints for meal times

- Encourage eating with others where possible.
- Set up a relaxed eating space. Turn off the radio and TV.
- Serve meals and snacks at regular times and allow plenty of time for meals.
- Offer meals and snacks when the person is most alert.
- Avoid patterns or extra items on tables and plates.
- Serve one course or even one food at a time to reduce confusion. Offer small portions at a time.
- Prompt the person to eat during the meal and place cutlery in their hands.
- Reduce risk of burns by ensuring food is not too hot.
- An alarm clock, or phone call maybe a useful reminder for meals and snacks.

Food ideas

- Use familiar foods - cook and present them in familiar ways.
- Try bright, colourful food that looks and smells good.
- Offer nourishing drinks such as milkshakes in between meals if needed.
- Finger foods can make meal and snack times easier. See the factsheet 'Eating Well with Dementia - Finger Foods' for more information.
- Snacks that are easy to eat and don't need to be refrigerated can be left out where they can be easily seen.
- Add minced meat, eggs or legumes in casseroles and stews.
- Soft, moist foods may be easier to eat.
- Be careful of sticky, dry or crunchy foods as they may cause choking.
- Some people may have trouble eating two textures in one mouthful. An assessment by a speech pathologist may be needed.

If cooking meals is challenging

- Pre-prepared meals from the supermarket are a good option. Choose meals high in protein.
- Prepare large quantities of food when you have time and freeze individual portions.
- Get family and friends to help prepare meals.
- Arrange home delivered meals from meal services or ask if home delivery is available from the person's favourite restaurant or fast food outlet.
- Home support services may be able to assist with meal preparations, serving and prompting with eating.
- Consider sometimes eating out. Be sure to check first that the person with dementia is comfortable with the venue and food.

If overeating is a problem

- Have healthy, low energy snacks within easy reach, for example fruit or pieces of cooked vegetables.
- Spread meals and snacks out over the day.
- Provide low energy fluids such as water at the beginning of a meal.
- Distract the person with outings and activities.

Changes in food likes and dislikes

- Beware the person may like odd tastes for example, sweet and savoury mixes.
- Try new dishes.
- If the person craves sweet foods, give them everyday sweet foods like dairy foods and fruit.
- Have medication checked by the GP as they may cause taste changes.

If spilling of foods and drinks is a problem

- Try adapted cups and lightweight cutlery. Ask your community nurse or occupational therapist for help.
- Place a non-slip placement under the plate.
- Cut up meat and hard vegetables or try finger foods.