

Eating and drinking with dementia

This information sheet provides some tips to help with some of the eating and drinking problems often faced by people living with dementia and their families and carers.



Problems often experienced in dementia

Dementia affects the brain, altering memory and changing the way the brain sends and receives information. Ability to communicate can decline, as can mobility, dexterity and co-ordination. Here are some common eating and drinking problems in dementia.

Changes in dietary behaviour

Tastes can change, resulting in different food choices and ways of eating. Spoiled foods may be eaten.

There can be practical problems, like becoming less able to shop, prepare food and use cutlery. People sometimes forget to eat or drink – or forget they've just eaten.

With advancing dementia, people can lose the ability to eat independently. Some people eat non-foods. The person with dementia might be unable to ask for foods/fluids or describe problems such as dental pain or heartburn.

Dementia can affect mood. And loss of appetite may indicate low mood. Food refusal can be part of the disease process in advancing dementia.

Increased energy requirements

Pacing and wandering can burn off a lot of energy, which needs replacing with extra calories. Some medications which reduce pacing can over sedate which is likely to reduce food intake.

Dehydration is common due to forgetting or not wanting to drink. This can lead to problems such as constipation, urinary infections, pressure ulcers and falls. Serious dehydration can result in hospital admission.

Medications can have side-effects such as feeling sick, stomach cramps, constipation and sedation. Others can increase appetite, causing weight gain and high blood glucose levels.

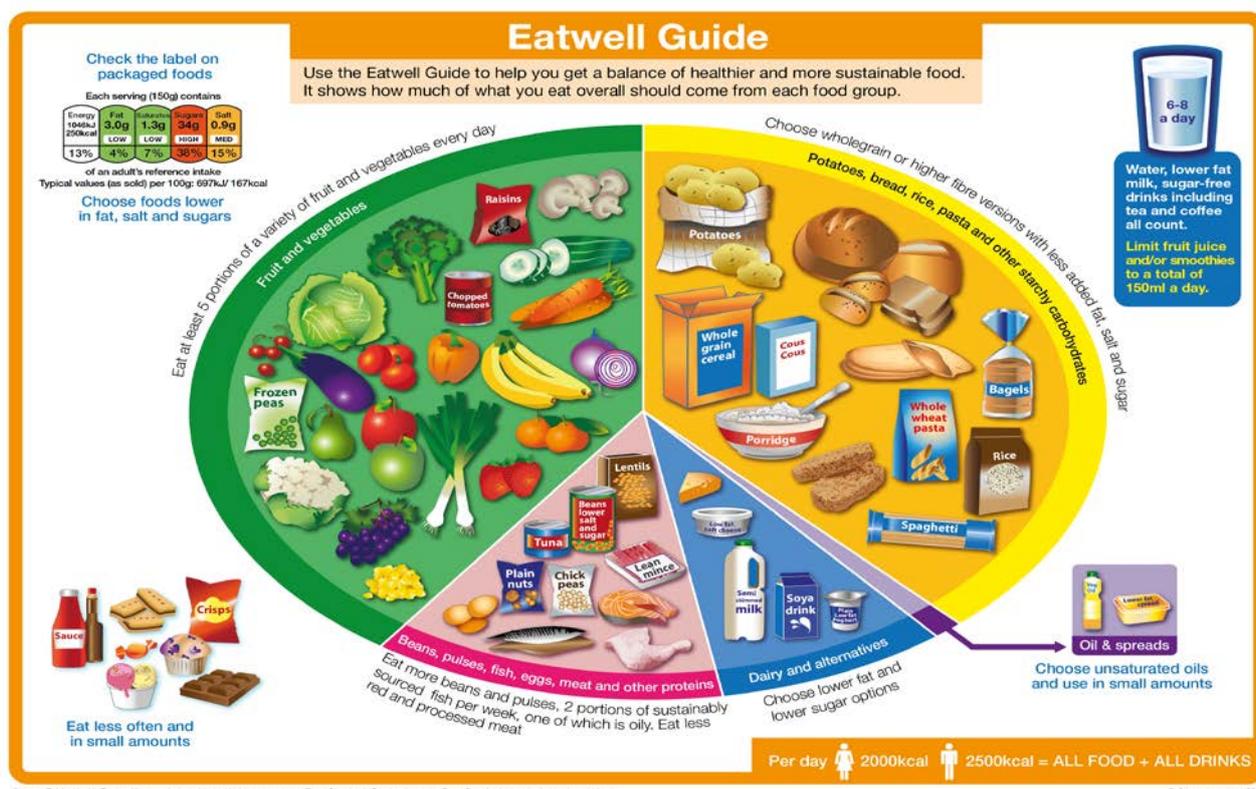
Stress Eating and drinking worries can be stressful for families and carers, putting pressure on relationships.

Difficulty swallowing As dementia progresses some people find chewing or swallowing difficult – or forget to swallow, resulting in pouching food.

Coughing at meal/drink times, chewing continuously or repeat chest infections can be signs of a swallowing problem. A Speech & Language Therapist may need to assess and advise on suitable foods and drinks.

Nutritional needs in dementia

Healthy eating is the best advice for anyone whose weight is healthy, or overweight, and not following a special diet. See the *Eatwell Guide* below.



The *Eatwell Guide* shows how much of what you eat should come from each food group. This includes everything you eat during the day, including snacks. Try to eat:

- plenty of fruit and vegetables
- plenty of bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods – choose wholegrain varieties whenever you can
- some milk and dairy foods
- some meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein
- just a small amount of foods and drinks high in fat and/or sugar

Poor appetite? Losing weight? Unintentional weight loss can result in malnutrition. This makes infections and falls more likely. Wounds take longer to heal. People who are malnourished tend to become less active and less able to look after themselves. These problems can lead to frequent and long hospital admissions.

Energy (calories) and protein are important to help stabilise or increase weight. Healthy eating principles can be relaxed until eating has improved and weight has stabilised.

- For extra protein and energy, select foods and drinks in the **meat, fish, eggs, beans** and **milk and dairy foods** sections of the *Eatwell Guide*.
- For extra energy, select **foods and drinks high in fat and/or sugar**

- Fruit and vegetables are usually lower in protein and energy. For someone who feels overfaced by a full meal, prioritise the high protein high energy foods until eating better.

See our information sheets ***Eating Well with a Small Appetite***, ***Finger foods*** and ***Nourishing Drinks for Adults*** for tips on how to get extra nutrition into your diet without feeling overfaced. Also see our dietary leaflet **on High energy High Protein Diet Shopping list ideas** to get useful examples of high calorie, high protein foods.

Fluids Adequate fluid intake is important to help prevent many problems such as urine infections, falls, pressure ulcers and constipation. See our information sheet ***Staying Hydrated*** for practical tips to improve fluid intake, including guidance on wet foods.

Drink spillages may be a problem due to tremors. A mug with an easy to grip handle filled half way can help. Some find a two-handed cup easier. Some like a straw but bear in mind straws can make fluid go down the wrong way if swallowing is impaired. Some people find cartons easier to manage. Drinks with a thick consistency such as milkshakes or smoothies can be easier to control.

Fluids might be preferred in a recognised glass or cup. Try a clear glass so fluid can be seen and recognised, or a brightly coloured glass or mug. All mugs, cups and glasses are different; it can really help to find one that the person feels confident to use.

With dementia people often need prompting and encouraging.



Meal time environment

- The environment needs to be calm and relaxed.
- The room should be bright and well lit.
- Mealtimes should be given priority in the daily routine.
- Allow an opportunity to toilet and wash before eating.
- Avoid distractions e.g. TV or loud music – but calm quiet music can reduce agitation.
- Serve meals where the person with dementia feels comfortable.
- Ensure the eating area is not too cluttered; this can overstimulate and be overwhelming.
- Some people enjoy company, others don't. This can change from meal to meal.
- Meals should be relaxed and unhurried.
- Images of food can be used for reminiscence activities, helping stimulate interest in food by reconnecting with familiar foods from the past.

Practical tips for carers

- Allow plenty of time for a meal
- Offer foods the person likes and provide variety. Try different foods as likes and dislikes can change
- Try regular snacks and small meals rather than set mealtimes- 'little and often approach'
- Try different flavours, colours and smells. The aroma of cooking can stimulate appetite
- Sweeter and/or stronger foods may be preferred. Experiment with sugar/honey, seasoning, spices, chutneys and sauces
- Avoid making food and drinks too hot
- Presentation should be attractive and colourful. Avoid serving white food on a white plate. Don't overload the plate
- Use recognisable plates, cups and glasses
- Foods kept in a clear (glass-fronted) fridge, cupboards or open shelving units make it possible to see foods inside them
- It might help to keep items, such as tea, coffee, sugar, snacks in sight in clear see through containers
- Make the most of good times of day for energy dense foods - often breakfast and lunchtimes but could be night time
- Finger foods are sometimes preferred. See our **Finger Foods** leaflet
- People can become sensitive to foods with mixed textures, e.g. cereal with milk, minestrone soup. Softer, single textured foods may be more acceptable.
- Texture modified meals need to be nutritionally adequate and look attractive
- If food goes cold it is less appetising. Try half portions to keep it warm or use the microwave to reheat
- Walking away from an unfinished meal does not mean it is finished. Try prompting to come back to the table. Some people will eat part of their meal, then tire of it but will eat some of an alternative meal
- Don't withhold dessert if the savoury meal hasn't been completed
- Consider specialist aids e.g. deep lipped plates, non-slip place mats, adapted cutlery, wide necked mug
- Avoid straws or spouted beakers unless you have been advised by a professional to use these. They can be undignified and can cause drinks to go down the wrong way
- Care homes should provide flexibility in menu choices:
 - a high protein high energy menu for anyone who is losing weight or not eating well
 - a healthy eating menu for others who are eating well and have a stable, healthy weight or are overweight
 - offer finger food options (see our **Finger Foods** leaflet)
 - texture modified choices



Assisting with eating

- Always allow the person to eat independently. They may not always need assistance.
- Offer meals that can be eaten with a spoon rather than knife and fork to help maintain independence.
- Hand over hand guidance with cutlery can help coordination at the start of a meal.
- Only assist with feeding if fully alert, not anxious and not lying down.
- Don't worry about mess.
- Explain what the food or drink is.
- Serving one familiar food at a time can reduce confusion.
- Cutting food into smaller pieces before presenting the plate can be helpful.
- Gentle prompts might be needed.
- Pace the feeding around what suits the person being fed.
- For someone with swallowing difficulties, ensure an upright position and follow advice provided by Speech & Language Therapy around thickened fluids and texture of diet.

Social eating

People often eat and drink better in a social, communal environment.

Age UK can offer advice about Wellbeing Cafes in local areas such as Sildsen, Keighley and Ilkley – contact details overleaf.



Further information

Helpful literature

Finger Foods – ask the person who gave you this leaflet

Eating Well with a Small Appetite – ask the person who gave you this leaflet

High Energy High Protein Shopping list ideas- ask the person who gave you this leaflet

Nourishing Drinks for Adults – ask the person who gave you this leaflet

Staying Hydrated – ask the person who gave you this leaflet

Eating, drinking and swallowing - ask the person who gave you this leaflet

Eating and Drinking, Factsheet 511, published by the Alzheimer's Society, available at alzheimers.org.uk

Eating well: supporting older people and older people with dementia – practical guide, published by The Caroline Walker Trust, available at cwt.org.uk/publications

Alzheimers Society guide to catering for people with dementia, published by the Alzheimer's Society, available at alzheimers.org.uk

Local support and advice

If you want to find out more about support, information and advice available in your local area for people living with dementia and carers, you might find the following helpful:



Alzheimer's Society Bradford: Tel 01274 58600.

Email Bradford@alzheimers.org.uk

Alzheimer's Society Harrogate (Craven) Tel 01423 813464.

Email harrogate@alzheimers.org.uk



Age UK North Craven

Tel 01729 823066. Email info@ageuknorthcraven.org

Age UK Bradford: Tel 01274 395144.

Email reception@ageukbradfordanddistrict.org.uk

Contact information

For further information contact the person who gave you this leaflet or:

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BD20 6TD

Tel: 01535 294758/294857 (direct lines)

The Trust's Patient Information Service is here to help you to find out more about health condition, local support groups and healthy living

The Patient Information Service is at Airedale General Hospital

Tel: 01535 294413 Email: your.health@anhst.nhs.uk

Web: www.airedale-trust.nhs.uk/YourHealth



If you require this leaflet in other languages or formats please telephone the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on **01535 294019**

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