



Eating well and dementia



Why is it important for people with dementia to eat well?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health for us all.

Good nutrition can help the body to maintain and improve strength, stay mobile and keep up independence, but illness and old age can put a strain on the body.

Many people living with dementia may experience a change in their relationship with food, eating and drinking. As dementia progresses, the behavioural, emotional and physical changes that occur can make eating and drinking more difficult. Depending on the individual, these changes can result in dehydration, weight loss or weight gain.

As a carer this can be upsetting and you may find it reassuring to understand how you can help the person you care for to eat and drink well.

There are some simple ways that you can help a person with dementia to enjoy meal times and get the best from their diet.

This booklet is for anyone caring for a person with dementia and provides useful information and tips on how to help them eat well.

What is dementia?

Dementia is the term used to describe a collection of symptoms, including memory loss, mood changes and problems with speech and understanding. These symptoms occur when the brain is damaged by certain diseases, including Alzheimer's Disease.

Dementia is progressive, which means the symptoms will gradually get worse.

Each person will experience dementia in a different way. People may have similar symptoms but the degree to which they affect each individual may vary.

Some common symptoms of dementia include the following:

- **Memory loss** - Especially short term, for example, forgetting what happened earlier in the day or the way home from the shops.
- **Mood changes** - People living with dementia may become withdrawn, agitated or scared about what is happening to them.
- **Problems with speech and understanding** - For example, difficulties finding the correct words for things.

As we age, many people notice their memory gets worse and sometimes it is unclear if this is normal ageing or a sign of dementia. However, most of us will remember something related to what has been forgotten. If your loved one is developing dementia they will not have any recall related to the object or event in question.

How can dementia affect diet and nutrition?

As dementia progresses a person may find it more difficult to eat and drink for many different reasons. The difficulties experienced will vary; some people with dementia will have a poor appetite or difficulty chewing and swallowing, whilst others may overeat.

Weight loss

In some cases a person living with dementia may lose weight unintentionally due to a variety of reasons, including the following:

- **Poor appetite** - People with dementia may have a poor appetite for several reasons. Mood changes can affect a person's feeling towards food and some may no longer enjoy the food they are used to eating. Problems with chewing or swallowing, or coordination changes can make eating difficult and put people off their food. Depression is also common when someone becomes aware that they have dementia, and this can sometimes lead to a loss of appetite.
- **Chewing and swallowing problems** - Sore mouth and gums, or ill-fitting dentures, can make it difficult to eat. Some people may also struggle to communicate to you that they are experiencing these changes and will simply stop eating as much as a result of their discomfort, leading to weight loss.
- **Changes in food preferences** - As dementia progresses, a person's like and dislikes for food may change. This can affect the amount and variety of foods eaten.



Eating well for people with dementia

- **Coordination problems** - Eating using cutlery or drinking from a glass can become difficult due to coordination problems. This can make mealtimes a challenge and take the pleasure out of eating and drinking.
- **Increased energy needs** - Some people with dementia may be very active or like to walk around a lot and, as a result, they will use more energy and could start losing weight if they do not increase the amount they eat.
- **Independent living** - If someone is living alone they may find it challenging to prepare food or may forget to eat the food they have, especially if it is not visible and readily accessible.

Weight gain

Alternatively, some people living with dementia may eat too much and gain excess weight. This can be due to:

- **Changes in food preferences** - Some people favour higher calorie, sugary foods, which may cause weight gain.
- **Memory loss** - People with dementia may sometimes forget they have already eaten and, therefore, duplicate meals or snacks, causing them to overeat.
- **Grazing** - If food is visible and available some people might graze throughout the day without being able to keep track of what they have already eaten, e.g. boxes of chocolates, fruit bowls, etc.
- **Boredom and stress** - If people are going through periods of boredom, stress or loneliness, they may comfort eat.

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health for us all. This includes eating foods from all the different food groups, to provide the body with all the nutrients it needs.*

What foods are important in dementia?

Studies have shown that certain combinations of nutrients may help to support healthy brain function. These nutrients include healthy fats, such as omega-3 fish oils and vitamins and minerals, which can be found in the following foods:

- Plenty of fruit and vegetables to provide a good source of vitamins and minerals.
- Nuts, seeds and olive oil to provide a variety of healthy fats.
- Twice weekly intakes of oily fish to provide a good intake of fish oil, which is rich in omega-3.

If you are struggling to get your loved one to eat a healthy, balanced diet with these foods there are other options available that may help:

- **Vitamins and mineral supplements** - tablets or tonics.
- **Omega-3 fish oils** - tablets or oils.
- **Medical foods** - nutrient combinations in a drink format for specific disease states.

Always consult your doctor or healthcare professional who will be able to direct you to products, where studies have shown positive results in dementia.

* To learn more about the different food groups go to www.carersuk.org/nutrition.





Eating well on a budget

However, if you are on a budget it can sometimes be a struggle to eat well. There are simple and affordable ways to shop for a healthy, balanced diet:

- Frozen or canned fruit (in juice) and vegetables are cheaper than fresh varieties - and just as healthy.
- Supermarkets often reduce prices on products that are close to their sell by date and this can be a great way to pick up a bargain. Make sure you can cook or eat everything you buy before it goes off.
- Tinned sardines and mackerel are affordable fish that are a good source of omega-3 fish oils.
- Use supermarket own brands as cheaper alternatives to branded products.

Tips to encourage eating

Poor appetite

There are many ways to stimulate a person's appetite and the following hints and tips can help encourage a person's interest in food:

- Be flexible with mealtimes and make the most of 'good eating times' - different people will have more of an appetite at certain times of the day, whether this is breakfast or teatime.
- Offer small portions of food, more frequently throughout the day.
- Try not to overload the plate with too much food and have a gap between the main meal and dessert.
- Include foods that are familiar to the person and also try new adventurous foods that they may not have had before.
- Make meals look appetising and eye-catching by including different colours, such as a bowl of chopped fruit or mixed vegetables.

Coordination problems

- Cut up meals into pieces that can be eaten with a spoon to enable people to remain independent when eating.
- Make finger foods* that can easily be eaten without using cutlery, e.g. small sandwiches, crackers with soft cheese or orange segments. These are ideal for people who have difficulty using cutlery or for those that are restless and like to walk around at mealtimes.



Changes in food and taste preferences

As dementia progresses, a person's likes and dislikes for different foods may change. Some people may start to enjoy unusual food combinations, such as mixing sweet and savoury flavours. As a carer, it can be difficult to understand these changes and the following tips can help:

- Add a teaspoon of sugar or honey to savoury foods, such as quiches, pies and omelettes.
- Serve sweet sauces (e.g. apple sauce) with a main meal to add sweetness.
- Be adventurous and cook new dishes with herbs and spices.
- Roast vegetables, such as carrots and parsnips with honey.

Chewing and swallowing problems

It is important to speak to your GP if you are concerned about these problems. Your GP may refer the person with dementia to a Speech and Language Therapist, who can assess the chewing and swallowing problems and provide help with managing any difficulties.

Independent living

- There are services available that deliver ready-made meals to people living in the community who have difficulty preparing their own food. Your local social services team can help you with this.
- Local day centres or lunch clubs can also offer social contact, as well as a nutritious meal.

* For further finger food ideas go to www.carersuk.org/nutrition

Tips for gaining weight or improving nutritional intake



Some people living with dementia may struggle to eat enough for a variety of reasons and this can lead to weight loss. Here are some practical ways to help improve their nutritional intake:

- Eat small, frequent meals and snacks every 2-3 hours.
- Increase intake of foods that are high in calories and protein, for example: meat, fish, eggs, full fat dairy products (like yogurt and cheese).
- Eating snacks such as biscuits, cakes, chocolate, nuts or crackers may be useful.
- Avoid drinking fluids with meals, which may reduce how much is eaten.
- Consume nourishing drinks based on milk, such as Complan, to increase energy and protein intake. These are also available as 'ready to drink' options, which are convenient when you are at home or out and about.

Tips for losing weight and eating a balanced diet

A small amount of weight gain is OK, but if weight gain becomes excessive it is important to talk to your GP about these changes. The following tips can help a person with dementia to manage or lose weight:

- Replace high fat and sugary snacks with healthier alternatives such as nuts, dried fruit, cereal bars or wholegrain crackers.
- Provide everything in moderation. There is no need to cut out any food group, as long as you control portions. For example, you can provide smaller portions by using a small plate.
- Keep high calorie foods out of sight and make pieces of cut up fruit and vegetables available to snack on.
- Encourage the person to do activities they enjoy, to reduce their boredom and stress. Even just going out for a walk can relieve some stress.



What happens when food is not enough?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet plays a key role in keeping the body strong. But illness, old age and stress can put a strain on the body. It can be hard to get enough food at these times, which can weaken the body further.

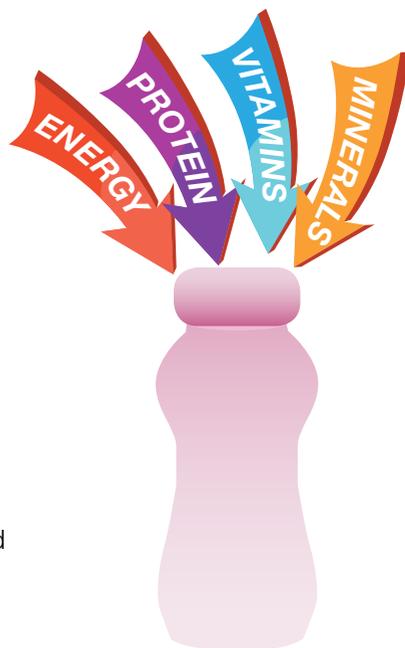
What is medical nutrition?

Medical nutrition has been specifically designed for those who find it difficult to get adequate nutrition from a normal diet alone. Medical nutrition is a scientifically formulated liquid food that is available in the form of a drink containing energy, protein, vitamins and minerals. It is particularly helpful for those living with a medical condition, recovering from an illness or operation, or those who have become weak and frail over time.

Speak to your GP

If you are worried that you are struggling with a normal diet, the practical tips within this leaflet can help improve your nutritional intake with food. You could also ask your pharmacist whether an over the counter product in a powdered format, such as Complan, is a suitable option alongside normal foods and drinks. However, should you continue to struggle, please speak to your GP or other healthcare professional about your concerns and whether medical nutrition is right for you.

Further information can be found at www.carersuk.org or by calling the Nutricia helpline on 0845 250 1011.



About Carers UK

Carers UK is here to improve carers' lives. Most of us will look after an elderly relative, a sick partner or a disabled family member. Caring is part of life but without the right support the personal costs of caring can be high. When caring affects your family, Carers UK is here for you to provide the support and advice you need.

Carers UK supports carers and provides information and advice about caring. It influences policy through research based on carers' real life experiences, and campaigns for the changes that make a real difference for carers.

Carers UK is working in partnership with Nutricia to help improve understanding about nutrition and caring. The partnership provides carers with information and resources on nutritional care for both themselves and the person they care for.

About Nutricia

Nutricia specialises in the delivery of advanced medical nutrition for all who need it, spanning from the very young to the elderly.

We supply high quality feeds, equipment and support services to patients and healthcare professionals. Through our Nutricia Homeward service we deliver feeds, feeding pumps, equipment and nursing care direct to patient's homes.

Carers UK and Nutricia

Carers UK is working in partnership with Nutricia to help improve understanding about nutrition and care. The partnership provides carers with information and resources on nutritional care for both themselves and the person they care for. This includes a range of leaflets on nutrition, including 'The importance of eating well for carers'.

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The information in this leaflet is for guidance only and is not an authoritative statement of the law. The information is correct as of August 2013.