

Dementia and Food

This dietary advice sheet gives some general information to help you make the recommended changes to your diet. If you need more detailed advice, or if you are following a special diet that makes it difficult to make these changes, please ask your doctor to refer you to a registered dietitian.

As dementia progresses, there may be changes in a person's eating habits and ability to eat. There may be changes in taste, ability to swallow or appetite (increase or decrease). Try to aim for a healthy diet, taking into account a person's likes and dislikes, to provide all the nutrients the body needs.

Constipation

Many older people have a problem with constipation. They should have:

- Fluid: 8 – 10 cups a day is recommended. Gentle reminders and prompts to drink may help.
- Fibre: try wholemeal bread, wholegrain breakfast cereals, pulses
- Physical activity

Anaemia

Folate-deficiency anaemia is common in dementia. Fruits, vegetables, liver, fortified breakfast cereals, fortified bread and yeast extract are useful sources.

Iron deficiency anaemia can be avoided by including iron rich foods in the diet: red meat, oily fish, kidney, fortified bread/cereals, beans, lentils.

Swallowing difficulties

Any swallowing difficulty needs to be investigated.

Ask a Doctor about a referral to a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT). The SLT **may** recommend a texture modified diet and/or thickened fluids.

Tips:

- Alternating hot and cold food and fluids to stimulate any difficulties at the oral stage.
- Trying different textures can stimulate the oral stage (if SLT has not made any specific recommendations)

Mouth problems

Dementia can make it difficult to manage dentures and/or maintain oral hygiene. Using a small-headed toothbrush after meals may help. If someone has lost weight, dentures may no longer fit. Mouth infections make it difficult to eat and drink.

Visuoperceptual difficulties in dementia

People with dementia can experience a number of visuoperceptual difficulties due to normal ageing, eye conditions, additional damage to the visual system caused by dementia and medications. Specific difficulties that have been reported include colour perception and object recognition. Using highly visible red cups and plates led to an increase in food and drink consumption.

Obesity

Some people with dementia gain excess weight. Encourage a healthy weight with small, regular meals and plenty of low calorie drinks/snacks between meals.

Weight loss

A person with dementia may develop a poor appetite or lose interest in food. This can cause weight loss and a dip in their overall well-being. A poor appetite may develop for numerous reasons - a change in food preferences, difficulties chewing and swallowing, co-ordination problems affecting eating and drinking, damage to brain caused by dementia, constipation or depression.

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Supporting a person with dementia to eat and drink

- Meals should be relaxed and unhurried
- If assisting a person to eat and drink, orientate them to the meal and talk about what you are offering them to help remind them of tastes and flavours
- Minimise distractions
- Offer food/drink when the person is calm and not anxious
- Ensure that they are alert, comfortable and sitting upright before offering food and drink

- If the person appears to have difficulty using cutlery - prompt the person and guide their hand to their mouth
- If a person is struggling to use cutlery to eat, offer finger foods.
- Gentle verbal prompting to clear the mouth of food and fluids (modelling this action can be useful if needed)



Useful resources

Eating well: supporting older people and older people with dementia

Published by: The Caroline Walker Trust (2011)

<http://www.cwt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/EW-Old-Dementia-Practical-Resource.pdf>

Alzheimer's Society

43-44 Crutched Friars, London, EC3N 2AE, Tel. 0330 222 1122

www.alzheimers.org.uk

Alzheimer's Society guide to catering for people with dementia

Author: Gwen Coleman
Email: publications@alzheimers.org.uk

Patient Information Leaflets & Local services

www.heron.nhs.uk

Please see 'Finger Food' diet sheet for more finger food ideas.