

# HELPING PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA GET THE MOST FROM THEIR DIET

## Poor food intake/food refusal

Many people with dementia have a poor appetite or lose interest in food. Poor appetite is a major cause of malnutrition<sup>1</sup> which can have an impact on energy levels, concentration and ability to fight infections.<sup>2</sup> However, there are ways to stimulate a person's appetite and interest in food...

### 1 MAKE FOOD AS APPEALING AS POSSIBLE

Presentation is important, bright and colourful foods are more appealing. Try not to overload the plate with too much food and only give the person one course at a time.

### 2 TRY TO KEEP FOOD WARM

People often lose interest in their food once it has gone cold. Insulated plates can keep food warmer for longer. Alternatively, serve half portions and keep the remainder warm until the first portion has been eaten. A microwave oven can also be used to reheat food during the meal.

### 3 STIMULATE THE MEMORY

Encourage the person to get involved at mealtimes. Helping to prepare food or laying the table can remind a person that it is time to eat as well as help to maintain their skills and independence.

### 4 ENCOURAGE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Daily activity, such as walking or spending time in the garden, can also promote a healthy appetite.

### 5 AVOID "HARD TO EAT" FOOD

Some foods are difficult to eat and should be avoided. If a person has difficulties with coordination or using cutlery, they might find it very frustrating trying to eat food like peas or spaghetti. Adding too much gravy to food can also make it more difficult to eat. Finger foods can be used to increase food intake (see the factsheet "Finger Food Ideas" for more information).

### 6 OFFER POSITIVE ENCOURAGEMENT AND GENTLE REMINDERS TO EAT

If you are supporting a person with dementia at mealtimes, it is important to remember that their reactions are not a deliberate attempt to be 'difficult'. Try to remain positive and offer regular encouragement and praise.

### 7 ADAPT TO CHANGES IN TASTE AND EATING HABITS

Some people eat better at certain times of the day; they may have more energy in the morning and are able to eat a good breakfast, or they may prefer to have their main meal at midday. Be flexible and make the most of 'good eating times'.

1. Hickson M. Malnutrition and ageing. Postgrad Med J. 2006;82(963):2-8.

2. BAPEN. Introduction to Malnutrition. <https://www.bapen.org.uk/malnutrition-undernutrition/introduction-to-malnutrition> (accessed 28th February 2019).

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## Weight loss in Dementia

As dementia progresses, a person may lose weight unintentionally. This may be more noticeable if the person is very active because, for example, if they are walking regularly they will need more calories (energy) to maintain their weight.

### 1 OFFER SMALLER REGULAR MEALS AND SNACKS

A person with a small appetite may not respond well to large servings of food three times a day. In this case, try serving smaller portions at mealtimes and offer nourishing snacks in between mealtimes to supplement food intake, for example, 3 small meals and 2-3 snacks.

### 2 FORTIFY MEALS WITH HIGH ENERGY INGREDIENTS

- Add grated cheese to mashed potato
- Melt butter onto vegetables
- Add cream to porridge
- Add potato, cream and/or full fat milk to soup
- Make jelly with full fat milk instead of water
- Add cream to desserts
- Spread butter and/or jam thickly onto bread and biscuits
- Fry food in oil rather than steaming/ grilling or baking

## Swallowing problems in Dementia

Chewing and swallowing sometimes becomes a problem as dementia progresses. People may find chewing solid food difficult; they may hold food in their mouths rather than swallow it, or you may notice that they cough after swallowing.

If you have any concerns talk to the resident's dietitian who can provide advice, or ask for a referral to a Speech and Language Therapist who can perform a swallow assessment. Your healthcare professional may suggest changing the consistency, temperature and/or taste of drinks and food. This may include adding a specially designed thickening powders called

Nutlis and Nutlis Clear to fluids and food to help make them easier to swallow. For more information on swallowing difficulties and how Nutlis Clear and Nutlis Powder can help, visit [www.nutriciaHCP.com](http://www.nutriciaHCP.com).

## If a patient continues to lose weight and has poor food intake

The resident may benefit from a oral nutritional supplements (such as Fortisip Compact or Fortijuce) or a nutritional pudding (Forticreme Complete). These are foods for special medical purposes used to meet the needs of people who are losing weight or have a poor appetite.

**If the resident has special dietary requirements or swallowing difficulties please consult their Dietitian or Speech and Language Therapist before following the guidance above.**