

Nutrition

2.13

CARING FOR SOMEONE WITH DEMENTIA

This Help Sheet discusses the importance of good nutrition, and provides some practical ways that families and carers can ensure that a person with dementia is well nourished.

Good nutrition is important

The type of food we eat affects our health and our quality of life. Poorly nourished people get sick more often and recover from injury and illness more slowly. Poor nutrition is a major health problem for many older people.

For people with dementia, maintaining good nutrition presents extra challenges. A person with dementia may:

- Experience a loss of appetite
- Develop an insatiable appetite or a craving for sweets
- Forget to eat and drink
- Forget how to chew or swallow
- Experience a dry mouth, or mouth discomfort
- Be unable to recognise the food and drink they are given

Daily nutritional balance

The nutritional requirements of someone with dementia will be similar to other people of their age. However some people with dementia experience increased physical activity such as pacing, which means they will need larger amounts of food to prevent them from losing weight.

Dietary guidelines for older Australians recommend:

- Enjoying a wide variety of nutritious foods
- Eating at least three meals every day
- Drinking plenty of water
- Eating plenty of vegetables (including legumes) and fruit
- Eating plenty of cereals, bread and pastas
- Eating a diet low in saturated fats

- Choosing foods low in salt and using salt sparingly
- Including foods high in calcium
- Using added sugars in moderation

Some common problems

Some people with dementia may forget to eat.

What to try

- An alarm clock, or a phone call, may be a useful reminder at mealtimes
- Snacks that are easy to eat and don't need to be refrigerated can be left out where they can be easily seen

Some people with dementia can't or won't prepare meals for themselves. This can be particularly difficult if they are living alone.

What to try

- Meals should be shared social occasions whenever possible
- Delivered meals such as meals-on-wheels. However these may not provide all of a person's daily nutritional needs or may not be what the person is used to eating
- Home support to assist with meal preparation, serving and to discretely prompt with eating
- Pre-prepared meals from the supermarket
- Family and friends helping to prepare meals and or eating together
- Preparing large quantities of food, then freezing into meal size amounts
- Home delivered ready-to-eat food from restaurants or fast food outlets
- Eating out. However check first that the person with dementia will be comfortable with the venue and food

Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**

Visit Alzheimer's Australia at **www.alzheimers.org.au**

- Stocking up on healthy snacks such as yoghurt, cheese or dried fruit that do not need preparation or cooking

Alcohol may stimulate the appetite and add to the enjoyment of a meal. However, too much alcohol can replace food and people can run the risk of becoming malnourished. If a person with dementia is a heavy drinker it may be difficult to change their drinking habits.

What to try

- Make sure that they are well nourished
- Discourage drinking on an empty stomach
- Offer drinks other than alcohol
- Water alcohol down

Finger foods

All food should be able to be eaten with dignity. If a person with dementia is having difficulty with cutlery, finger foods can be a nutritious and easy alternative.

Finger foods are simply foods prepared so that they can be eaten with the fingers. This enables people who would otherwise lose this level of independence to feed themselves.

What to try

- Prepare a plate of nutritious and attractive food that can be picked up in the fingers
- Make sure that the food is accessible. Put it on a flat plate with no pattern so that the food can be seen clearly. Make sure the plate is in comfortable reaching distance
- Don't use complicated table settings and avoid lots of different cutlery, crockery, glasses, foods and drinks together
- Serve only one plate of food at a time
- Impairment to taste and smell senses can reduce appetite. The preparation of tasty, strongly flavoured and aromatic food may help
- Allow time for the memory to respond
- It may be necessary initially to help fingers to convey the food from the plate to the mouth
- It can help to eat together so that the person with dementia can copy you
- Types of foods served need to take the culture and past eating habits of the person into consideration

Eating in the later stages of dementia

It is common for people in the later stages of dementia to lose a considerable amount of weight. People may forget how to eat or drink, or may not recognise the food they are given. Some people become unable to swallow properly. Providing nutrition supplements may need to be considered. If a person has swallowing difficulties, or is not consuming food or drink over a significant period of time and their health is affected, nutrition supplements may be considered for consumption other than by mouth.

Based on:

Finger foods for independence; For people with Alzheimer's disease and other eating difficulties, by Lois Newton and Dr Alan Stewart, and *Reduce the risk: A common sense guide to preventing poor nutrition in older people*, by Carolyn Bunney and Rudi Bartl

Further Information

A dietician or doctor can advise you about good nutrition. Your local hospital, community health service, Commonwealth Respite & Carelink Centre, or your doctor can put you in touch with a dietician.

Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centres around Australia provide information about the range of community care programs and services, including diatetic services.

Call **1800 052 222** or visit

www.commcarelink.health.gov.au

Alzheimer's Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**.

The Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service (DBMAS) is a national telephone advisory service for families, carers and care workers who are concerned about the behaviours of people with dementia. The service provides confidential advice, assessment, intervention, education and specialised support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and can be contacted on **1800 699 799**.

For further information and to view other Help Sheets visit our website at **www.alzheimers.org.au**