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Malta

*Good nutrition for persons suffering
from dementia*





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NUTRITION FOR PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM DEMENTIA



The Importance of Eating & Drinking

- **Healthy, balanced diet**
 - **Avoiding weight loss , vulnerability to infection, reduced muscle strength and fatigue.**
 - **Avoid dehydration**
 - **A higher-calorie diet** may be appropriate.
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Weight loss

- Weight loss is common in people with dementia, although the causes vary. They may include:
 - lack of appetite
 - difficulties cooking
 - problems with communicating or recognising hunger
 - poor co-ordination
 - tiring more easily, and
 - difficulties with chewing and swallowing.
- If the person is losing weight, the GP/doctor can refer them to a nutritionist/dietitian.



Common Problems

- Eating and drinking problems caused by **poor appetite, cognitive impairment, physical disabilities and sensory disabilities** (hearing and sight loss).
- Eating and drinking difficulties are **unique to the individual** and their situation.
 - The person's beliefs, culture, tastes and life history should be considered.
- As dementia progresses, the person is likely to need more support to meet their needs.



Reasons for poor appetite

- **Depression** expressed as loss of appetite.
 - **Communication** that they are hungry or that they dislike the food they have been given.
 - They may communicate their needs through their behaviour.
 - Prompts and pictures, may help.
 - **Pain** may be due to problems with their dentures, sore gums or painful teeth. Oral hygiene and regular mouth checks are important.
 - **Tiredness** can also lead to
 - problems with concentration or difficulties with coordination.
 - It's important to be aware of this and support the person to eat when they are most alert.
 - Eating small portions more regularly is better than having set mealtimes.
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Reasons for poor appetite

- **Medication** changes can result in appetite changes.
 - **Physical inactivity** may cause lack of hunger.
 - Encourage them to be active.
 - Equally, if the person is very active or restless (walking about or fidgeting) they may use extra calories and need to eat more to replace them.
 - **Constipation** can result in the person feeling bloated or nauseous, making them less likely to want to eat.
 - Try to prevent constipation, offering fibre-rich foods and providing plenty of fluids.
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Ways to encourage eating

- Regular snacks or small meals.
 - Appealing food
 - Look for opportunities to encourage the person to eat.
 - Provide food the person likes.
 - Try different types of food, eg milkshakes or smoothies.
 - Food tastes may change, so stronger flavours or sweet foods.
 - Do not withhold desserts if the person hasn't eaten their savoury meal.
 - Keep food warm
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Ways to encourage eating

- **Soft food** for chewing problems.
 - Consider **pureed food**.
 - Encourage the person to **get involved** at mealtimes. They could help **prepare the food** or **lay the table**.
 - **Positive encouragement** and gentle **reminders** to eat.
 - A relaxed, friendly **atmosphere** with some soft music may help.
 - Use eating and drinking as an **activity and social stimulation**.
 - Aim for the **least stressful solutions**. Common sense and a creative approach often help.
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Cognitive Difficulties

- **Recognising food and drink**

- People with dementia may **struggle to recognise** food and drink, which can result in it going uneaten.
 - This can be due to:
 - Damage that dementia causes to the brain
 - Unfamiliar food
 - How food is presented
 - Problems with sight, they may not be able to see the food.
 - To help:
 - Explain what the food is
 - Use pictures
 - Make sure the person is wearing the correct glasses
 - Do not assume that the person doesn't want to eat.
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Cognitive Difficulties

■ **Concentration**

- People with dementia may not be able to concentrate well, i.e. may have difficulties focusing on a meal **until it is finished**. This may be because they are tired.
 - Don't assume someone has finished because they have stopped eating.
 - **Finger foods** and smaller portions can help to make the task easier. If you are helping someone to eat and it goes on for too long, it can turn into a negative experience.
 - The food can become **cold** or the process may be overwhelming.
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Motor Difficulties

- **Problems with coordination**
 - If **struggling with a knife and fork**, chop food, use spoon.
 - If **difficulty using cutlery**, prompt the person and guide their hand to their mouth to remind them of the process involved.
 - Try **finger foods** such as sandwiches, slices of fruit, vegetables, sausages, cheese and quiche. These are often easier to eat when co-ordination becomes difficult.
 - Let the person **eat where** they feel **comfortable**.
 - Speak to an **occupational therapist** about aids that can help, such as specially adapted cutlery or non-spill cups.
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Motor Difficulties

- **Chewing and Swallowing**
 - They may forget to chew or they may hold food in their mouth.
 - If the person wears **dentures**, they should be comfortable and fitted properly. People with dementia can tire easily.
 - Eating soft, moist food that needs minimal chewing can help.
 - As dementia progresses, **swallowing difficulties** become more common, although they can vary from person to person.
 - A referral to a speech and language therapist can help.
 - Weight loss, malnutrition and dehydration can also be consequences of swallowing difficulties.
 - Ensure that they are **alert, comfortable and sitting upright** or, if in bed, well positioned, before offering food and drink.
 - A physiotherapist can advise on positioning techniques and an occupational therapist can advise on aids for eating and drinking.
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Sensory Difficulties

- **Temperature**

- Some people with dementia will lose the ability to judge the temperature of food. Make sure food is not too hot, as it could burn the person's mouth and result in eating becoming uncomfortable.

- **Drinking enough**

- The sensation of thirst changes as people get older, which can sometimes mean the person isn't aware they're thirsty. They may be less able to provide drinks for themselves.
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Sensory Difficulties

- **Ensuring the person drinks enough**
 - **Have a drink on hand** whenever the person is eating something.
 - Use a **clear glass** so the person can see what's inside, or a brightly coloured cup to draw attention.
 - If possible, offer the person the cup or put it in their **line of sight**.
 - **Describe** what the drink is and where it is, so that if the person has a problem with their sight they are still able to find the drink.
 - **Offer different types** of drink (both hot and cold) throughout the day.
 - Make sure the cup or glass is **suitable** – not too heavy or a difficult shape.
 - **Foods** that are **high in fluid** can help, eg gravy, jelly and ice cream.
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Behavioural Difficulties

- **Eating behaviours**
 - Refusing to eat food or spitting it out.
 - The person with dementia may become angry or agitated or exhibit challenging behaviour during mealtimes.
 - They may not want to accept assistance with eating. It can be a challenge to identify what the problem is, particularly if the person is struggling to find the words to explain it.
- Try **not to rush** the person with dementia, and help them maintain as much **independence** as possible.
- Look for **non-verbal clues** such as body language and eye contact as a means of communication.
- If a person is agitated or distressed, do not put pressure on them to eat or drink. Wait until the person is **calm** and **less anxious** before offering food and drink.

Behavioural Difficulties

■ Changes in eating habits & food preference

- People with dementia can experience changes in eating habits, both in terms of how much food they eat and when, and what food they prefer.
 - The **senses of taste and smell can decline**, which can lead to food being less palatable.
 - People may have a **preference** for additional sugar and salt. It is not uncommon for people with dementia to develop a fondness for sweet foods. People may start to have a less varied diet, only eating certain types of food.
 - **Damage to specific parts of the brain or a change in taste perception** may mean some people start to enjoy tastes they never liked before or dislike foods they always liked, so those providing food should try to be flexible. People with Alzheimer's disease can show even greater problems with their **sense of smell**, especially with odour memory.

Behavioural Difficulties

- **Catering for changing eating habits**
 - If someone has a preference for **sweet foods**, fruit may be a healthier option.
 - Add small amounts of sugar or honey to savoury food.
 - Sweet sauces or chutneys can be served with savoury dinners.
 - Herbs and spices could be used to enhance flavours.
 - Try food the person has never eaten before.
 - As dementia progresses, a person may put **non-food items** into their mouths, eg napkins or soap. There could be a number of reasons for this, including:
 - The person no longer **recognises** the item for what it is or understands what it is for. Remove from view the items that the person may confuse for food.
 - The person may be **hungry**. Offer food as an **alternative** to the item. Ensure that food is available, easy to see (both within eyesight and in clear contrast with the plate or immediate environment) and easy to access throughout the day so the person can eat when they want to.



Behavioural Difficulties

- **Tackling Overeating: Tips for carers**
 - Ensure that the person has **something to do** so they do not feel bored or lonely.
 - Leave **bite-sized** fruit, for example chopped bananas, orange segments or grapes, within reach of the person to snack on as desired.
 - Some carers remove **certain foods** from the house and try to **manage** how much a person eats.
 - If the person eats **non-food items** then it may help to **remove** these and offer snacks as a distraction.
 - If the person has developed a preference for particular foods, to the extent that this dramatically restricts the variety of food they are eating, or they are struggling with excess weight gain, refer to a nutritionist/dietitian.
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Eating Environment

- **Improving the eating environment: Tips for carers**
 - **Eat with the person.** This will help make eating a social activity and can also help maintain independence as they may be able to copy you.
 - **Make the environment** as **stimulating** to the senses as possible: familiar sounds of cooking, smells of the kitchen and food, and familiar sights such as tablecloths with flowers can all help.
 - Some people enjoy **eating with company**; others prefer to eat on their own. Sometimes this will vary from one meal to another. Either way, make sure the person has enough space.
 - A **noisy environment** can be distracting. The eating environment should be calm and relaxing. Switch off background noise.
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Eating Environment

- **Improving the eating environment: Tips for carers**
 - Let the person with dementia **choose where they sit and eat**. They should also be able to choose what they want to eat, within reason.
 - Some people with dementia will also have **problems with their sight**. They may not be able to see the food in front of them. Make sure the food is colourful and the environment is well lit. It may also help to give a verbal description of the food.
 - **Use colour** to support the person – the colours of the food, plate and table should be different. Avoiding patterned plates is important.
 - **Try not to worry about mess**; it's more important for the person to eat than to be tidy.



Meal Preparation

- It is important to **keep people involved in preparing food and drink**. This is because it can help to maintain certain skills, and keep the person interested in food and drink. You could **break down preparation into individual tasks**, for example preparing the vegetables or buttering bread. It's important for the person with dementia to do as much as they can for themselves. If the person has **carers** coming in, they may be able to help with the shopping or preparing the food.
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Living Alone

- **Meals on wheels** may be an option for people who need support to prepare food. **Frozen or refrigerated ready meals** could be another option.
 - Spoiled food, hidden food or not eating regularly are signs that the person with dementia may need extra support.
 - It is possible to arrange for **home carers** to visit the person at mealtimes and either prepare a meal for them, or stay with them while they eat.
 - **Offering solutions, making adaptations and increasing your knowledge** about difficulties will mean that you can support the person with dementia to eat and drink well.
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- Thank you for listening...

