

Nutrition

This help sheet discusses the importance of good nutrition. It explains practical ways families and carers can ensure someone living with dementia eats well.

Good nutrition is important

Eating well is important for everyone, to keep bodies strong. Having a strong body can help you to:

- fight off illness or injury
- manage other health conditions
- reduce health complications such as falls and infections.

Some people living with dementia experience changes that affect eating well, which could include:

- loss of appetite
- overeating, or developing a hunger that cannot be satisfied
- craving strong-flavoured foods that are high in sugar or salt
- forgetting to eat and drink
- forgetting how to chew or swallow
- the condition 'dry mouth', or mouth discomfort
- refusing food and drink or becoming less able to recognise what they are offered.

If the person has a loss of appetite, they may:

- not want to eat
- have little or no interest in food
- feel 'full'
- have unintentional weight loss
- not feel hungry
- skip meals.

If the person is overeating, they may:

- forget they have eaten recently
- be concerned when they will get their next meal
- have changes in what they would like to eat
- become obsessed by particular foods or meals.

Nutrition advice

Eating a varied and balanced diet and drinking plenty of water is important to help stay well.

A healthy diet should include a variety of foods from each of the following food groups:

- vegetables and legumes/beans
- fruit
- grain foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high fibre cereals
- lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds
- milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives, mostly reduced fat.

A healthy diet should limit foods and drinks containing saturated fat, added salt and added sugars.

Every person living with dementia is different, and this includes having different food and nutrition needs due to changes in appetite, weight, physical activity and abilities. Book regular appointments with the doctor or a dietician to receive advice specific to their needs.

Forgetting to eat or drink

If the person forgets to eat or drink:

- Maintain a regular routine for meals and snacks.
- Leave out snacks that are easily seen, easy to eat and don't need to be refrigerated.

Organising meals

Things to try if the person cannot or will not prepare meals for themselves:

- Whenever possible, make mealtimes shared social occasions, involving family and friends.
- Buy prepared meals from the supermarket. Or arrange home-delivered meals from restaurants, fast food outlets, meal delivery companies or Meals on Wheels. Choose meals which are nutritious that the person is used to eating.
- Contact My Aged Care or the National Disability Insurance Scheme to arrange meal delivery services or home support to assist with meal preparation and serving, and to gently prompt with eating.
- Cook large quantities of food, then freeze into meal-sized portions.
- Eat out, if the person living with dementia is comfortable with the venue and food.
- Stock up on healthy snacks that do not need preparation or cooking, such as yoghurt, cheese or dried fruit.

Drinking alcohol

If someone with dementia is a heavy drinker, it may be difficult to change their drinking habits. Too much alcohol can replace food and increase the risk of someone becoming malnourished. Alcohol is high in kilojoules, is nutrient-poor and can lead to weight gain.

What to try:

- Make sure the person is well-nourished.
- Discourage drinking alcohol on an empty stomach.
- Offer low-alcohol or alcohol-free drinks.
- Use a fancy glass or one the person likes.
- Involve the person in the process of making the drink.
- Ask visitors not to buy or bring alcohol.

Tips for serving food

What to try:

- If the person is having difficulty using cutlery, finger foods can be a nutritious and easy alternative.
- You may need to demonstrate how finger food can be picked up and put into the mouth. Or, eat together so that the person with dementia can copy you.
- Place food within easy reach.
- Allow time for the person to respond to the food.
- Serve only one plate of food at a time. Don't overload the plate.
- So food can be easily seen, use plain-coloured, flat plates.
- To aid independence, an occupational therapist or dietician could recommend specially-designed cutlery and other simple eating aids.
- Avoid patterned table settings or using lots of different types of cutlery, crockery, glasses, foods and drinks together.
- A loss of taste or smell can reduce a person's appetite. Preparing tasty, strongly-flavoured and aromatic food or using condiments may help.
- Serve foods that consider the person's culture and past eating habits.

Nutrition in the later stages of dementia

It is common for people in the later stages of dementia to lose a considerable amount of weight, so you may consider providing oral nutrition supplements.

If a person's ability to consume foods, fluids or nutrition supplements is inadequate, you will need to seek advice from a dietitian or doctor.

Based on:

L. Newton and Dr A. Stewart, Finger Foods for Independence: For People with Alzheimer's Disease and Other Eating Difficulties, 1997; C. Bunney and R. Bartl, A common sense guide to preventing poor nutrition in older people, Gosford, NSW: Nutrition Department, Central Coast Area Health Service, 1996; R. Bartl and C. Bunney, Best Practice Food and Nutrition Manual for Aged Care Homes Edition 2, 2015; D. Volkert, et al. ESPEN guidelines on nutrition in dementia, Clinical Nutrition, 2015.

Who can help?

- For extra advice on maintaining good nutrition, visit a doctor or dietician.
- Speech therapists and occupational therapists can provide further advice.
- Information on home support can be found on the **My Aged Care** website or the **National Disability Insurance Scheme** website
Visit: myagedcare.gov.au or ndis.gov.au
- The **Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service** (DBMAS) supports people living with dementia who experience changes in behaviour that impact their care or the carer.
Call: **1800 699 799**.

Additional reading and resources

- Caring for someone with dementia help sheets
Visit: dementia.org.au/help-sheets
- Dementia Australia library service
Visit: dementia.org.au/library
- Dementia Australia support
Visit: dementia.org.au/support
- Dementia Australia education
Visit: dementia.org.au/education

Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500

For language assistance: 131 450

Visit our website: dementia.org.au