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# Dementia and Nutrition

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Dementia can create challenges to proper nutrition, hydration, and weight maintenance. As a caregiver, here are some things you should know:

## Nutrition Basics

There is no specific diet for people with dementia or Alzheimer's disease. A balanced diet with protein, healthy fats, fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and dairy products, as tolerated, is usually recommended. If necessary, your dietitian will help you understand the recommended diets for other health conditions, like diabetes and heart disease, and how to liberalize them to best care for your loved one.

## Challenges with Appetite and Eating

There are many reasons for a decline in appetite with dementia. Here are some of the reasons and how to combat them:

- **Lack of hunger cues** – The sensation of hunger can decrease with age and dementia. Try providing meals at set times instead of waiting for your loved one to ask for food. Sometimes 4-6 small meals can be easier to eat than 2-3 large meals. Eating meals together as a group or family with minimal distractions can also help people eat better.
- **Not recognizing food** – It can be tough for those with dementia to distinguish food from the plate it's served on. Use solid color placemats and tablecloths with a plain-colored plate to help make food easier to recognize. Serving just one or two foods at a time can also help.



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- **Poor-fitting dentures** – If dentures don't fit right, eating can be painful. Go to the dentist regularly and have dentures checked.
  - **Medications** – Some medications can affect the appetite. If you notice a change with a new medication, let your medical team know.
  - **Difficulty feeding themselves** – Allow your loved one to be as independent with eating as possible. Increase his or her independence by using scoop plates or bowls, large-handled silverware, or opting for finger-foods. Be present during meals to help cut up food and demonstrate how to eat certain foods if needed. Help as much as he or she wants you to, but try not to worry about messes or slowness.
  - **Inactivity** – Physical activity can help increase appetite. Walking outside together, doing light housework, or even just doing upper body exercises sitting or lying down can help boost a low appetite.
  - **Decreased or altered sense of taste and smell** – Food may not smell or taste as appetizing as it once did, and this may cause people with dementia to have less desire to eat. Keep in mind your loved one's long-standing preferences and try to prepare foods that will be enjoyable, but also be flexible – remember that preferences may change suddenly and dramatically.
  - **Constipation** – Constipation can also decrease appetite. First, ask about any medications that might be causing constipation and see if they can be changed or removed. If not, you might need to add mild stool softeners or laxatives to help. Otherwise, you can *gradually* add fiber from (like whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and beans) and fluids to the diet. Avoid fiber supplements. If it's been more than 3 days since the last bowel movement, let your medical team know.

### Challenges with Hydration

As we age, the sensation of thirst can decrease. It can become more difficult to get to the bathroom, and medications can dehydrate the body. All of these things can decrease the amount of fluids that people with dementia take in. Many people need at least 8 cups of fluid daily. Drinks like juice, tea, coffee, and milk, as well as foods with high water content like soups, milkshakes, fruits, and vegetables can all help to maximize fluid intake.



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## **Challenges with Chewing and Swallowing**

Some people with dementia, especially mid- to late-stage Alzheimer's, develop swallowing problems that can lead to choking, infection, and weight loss.

- Provide foods at a comfortable texture. If he or she has missing, broken, or painful teeth, ill-fitting dentures, or tender gums, try cutting food into small pieces, serving softer foods like scrambled eggs, oatmeal, and well-cooked vegetables, or even grinding or pureeing food and mixing with sauces and gravies.
- Stay in the room while your loved one eats and watch for any problems chewing or swallowing. You may also need to remind him or her to swallow.
- Give plenty of time to eat. Remember that it may take longer for your loved one to finish eating. Try not to rush mealtimes.
- Encourage your loved one to sit up straight with the head slightly forward. Check his or her mouth at the end of the meal to make sure no food has been pocketed in the cheeks.
- Learn how to perform the Heimlich maneuver in case of emergency.

## **Challenges with Maintaining Weight**

Keep in mind that people who are less active need to eat less so it is common for a person with dementia to need less food than an average person. However sometimes this reduced appetite, can lead to unmet protein, calorie, and nutrient needs. Therefore, liquid nutrition supplements may be appropriate to offer after or between meals. Start with the tips on the previous page, but if your loved one is losing weight and his or her appetite does not increase, talk to your dietitian.

## **Resources**

For more information, talk to your dietitian, and check out these online resources:

- Meals On Wheels – free, home-delivered meal services for seniors ([mealsonwheelsamerica.org](http://mealsonwheelsamerica.org))
- MyPlate for Older Adults – healthy eating information, tips, and resources ([hnrc.tufts.edu/myplate](http://hnrc.tufts.edu/myplate))
- Alzheimer's Association Message Boards – exchange tips and resources with other patients or caregivers ([alzconnected.org](http://alzconnected.org))