Eating and drinking with dementia

Information for patients, relatives and carers

ℹ️ For more information, please contact:

**Department of Nutrition and Dietetics**

Scarborough Hospital
Tel: 01723 342415
Woodlands Drive, Scarborough, YO12 6QL

The York Hospital
Tel: 01904 725269
Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE

Caring with pride
Caring about what we do ● Respecting and valuing each other
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Introduction

Dementia affects the brain, altering memory and changing the way the brain sends and receives information. The ability to communicate can decline, as can physical mobility and co-ordination.

People living with dementia and their families and carers often face challenges when it comes to eating and drinking. This information booklet provides guidance in relation to some of these challenges.
Healthy eating with dementia

Healthy eating is the best dietary advice for anyone with dementia who has a stable, healthy weight or who is overweight and who is not following a special diet.

Try to:

- Eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day.
- Eat plenty of bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods; choose wholegrain varieties whenever possible.
- Consume some dairy and alternatives; choose lower fat and sugar options.
- Consume some beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins.
- Eat foods and drinks high in fat and/or sugar less often and in small amounts.
- Choose unsaturated oils and spreads and use in small amounts.

For further information about healthy eating, please see ‘The Eatwell Guide’ on the NHS website:

www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide
[Accessed April 2019]
Weight loss and malnutrition

Some people living with dementia experience unintentional or unplanned weight loss. This can result in malnutrition, which makes infections and falls more likely. Wounds may take longer to heal. People who are malnourished tend to become less active and less able to look after themselves. These problems can lead to more frequent and/or longer hospital admissions.

Countering weight loss

Energy (calories) and protein are important to help stabilise or increase weight. Healthy eating principles can be relaxed until eating has improved and weight has stabilised. These tips may help:

- Eat “little and often” by having small meals with snacks in between.
- Swap “diet”, “low calorie” or “low fat” options for those that contain more fat and sugar.
- Have milky drinks between meals and before going to bed.

If eating and drinking are becoming a challenge and this is leading to weight loss, the tips in the rest of this booklet may help too. Your GP can also provide further guidance or refer onto a Dietitian.
Common challenges with eating and drinking

In dementia, the following challenges in relation to eating and drinking can occur.

Changes in dietary behaviour

There may be changes in taste or how foods are perceived, resulting in different food choices and ways of eating. Spoiled foods may be eaten.

There can be practical problems, like becoming less able to shop, prepare food and use cutlery. People sometimes forget to eat or drink, or forget they have just eaten.

With advancing dementia, people can lose the ability to eat independently. Some people eat non-food items. The person with dementia might be unable to ask for foods/fluids or describe problems such as dental pain or heartburn.

Dementia can affect mood; loss of appetite may indicate low mood. Food refusal can also be part of advancing dementia.
Dehydration

Dehydration can occur due to forgetting or not wanting to drink. This can lead to problems such as constipation, urinary infections, pressure ulcers and falls. Serious dehydration can result in hospital admission.

Increased energy (calorie) requirements

Wandering can burn off a lot of energy, which needs replacing with extra calories in food and fluids. Some medications that reduce wandering can cause drowsiness, but this might reduce how much the person can eat and drink.

Difficulty swallowing

As dementia progresses some people find chewing or swallowing difficult, or forget to swallow, resulting in “pouching” of food inside the cheeks. Coughing at meal/drink times, chewing continuously or repeated chest infections can be signs of a swallowing problem.

A Speech and Language Therapist may need to assess and advise on suitable textures of foods and drinks. Discuss with the GP if there are any concerns about swallowing difficulties.
Practical tips for carers

Given some of the challenges with eating and drinking with dementia, the following practical tips may help.

Meal time environment

It is important to consider where the person with dementia eats and drinks. The environment is likely to influence how much food and drink the person takes.

Mealtimes should be given priority in the daily routine.

Allow the opportunity to use the toilet before eating.

Meals should be relaxed and unhurried - allow plenty of time.

The environment should be calm and relaxed and the room bright and well lit.

Avoid distractions such as television or loud music, although calm quiet music can be relaxing and reduce agitation.

Serve meals where the person with dementia feels most comfortable.

Ensure the eating area is not too cluttered as this can overstimulate and be overwhelming.

Some people enjoy company, others don’t; but this can change from meal to meal.
Presentation of foods and drinks

Offer foods the person likes and provide variety. Try different foods as likes and dislikes can change.

Try different flavours, colours and smells; the aroma of cooking can stimulate appetite.

Sweeter and/or stronger tasting foods may be preferred; experiment with sugar/honey, seasoning, spices, chutneys and sauces.

Avoid making food and drinks too hot.

Presentation should be attractive and colourful. Avoid serving light coloured food on a white plate and don’t overload the plate.

Fluids might be preferred in a recognised glass or cup. Try a clear glass so fluid can be seen or a recognised or a brightly coloured glass or mug.

People can become sensitive to foods with mixed textures, e.g. cereal with milk or minestrone soup. Softer, single textured foods may be more acceptable.
Meals that have an altered texture e.g. soft or pureed should be nutritionally balanced and look attractive. If food goes cold it is less appetising. Try half portions to keep it warm or use the microwave to reheat. Consider specialist aids such as deep-lipped plates, non-slip place mats, adapted cutlery, and wide necked mugs. An Occupational Therapist can help with this (and see ‘further information’ on page 16).

Avoid straws or spouted beakers unless you have been advised by a professional to use these. They can be undignified and can cause drinks to go down the wrong way.
Eating pattern

Prompt and encourage the person to drink throughout the day. Try regular snacks and small meals rather than sticking to set mealtimes.

Make the most of good times of day for nutritious foods and drinks; this is often breakfast and lunchtime but could also be night time.

Finger foods are sometimes preferred as these can be eaten on the move if the person tends to wander. See our separate booklet “Finger Foods”.

Walking away from a partly eaten meal does not always mean it is finished. Try prompting to come back to the table. Some people will eat part of their meal, then tire of it but will eat some of an alternative meal. Offer pudding or dessert even if the main part of the meal has been left.
Assisting with eating and drinking

Some people with dementia need assistance to eat and drink. However, it is important to promote as much independence as possible.

Gentle prompts might be needed.

Explain what each food or drink is.

Offer meals that can be eaten with a spoon rather than knife and fork to help maintain independence.

Hand over hand guidance with cutlery can help co-ordination at the start of a meal.

Only assist with feeding if the person is fully alert, not anxious and not lying down.

Don’t worry about mess.

If drinks are often spilled, a mug with an easy to grip handle filled half way can help. Some find a two-handled cup easier.

Serving one familiar food at a time can reduce confusion.

Cutting food into smaller pieces before presenting the plate can be helpful.
Pace the feeding around what suits the person being assisted to eat.

If the person isn’t opening their mouth, use a verbal cue or massage their cheek gently.

For someone with swallowing difficulties, ensure an upright position and follow advice provided by Speech & Language Therapy around consistencies of foods and fluids.
Menu choices in hospitals and care homes

Hospitals and care homes should provide flexibility in menu choices to suit the varying needs of people with dementia, including:

- High protein, high energy (calorie) menu choices for anyone who is losing weight or not eating well.

- Healthy eating menu choices for others who are eating well and have a stable, healthy weight or are overweight.

- Finger food options (see our separate “Finger Foods” booklet).

- Altered texture choices e.g. soft and pureed foods.

Social eating

People with dementia often eat and drink better in a social, communal environment.

The Alzheimer’s Society, Age UK and Dementia Forward can offer advice about cafes and social eating events in local areas such as York, Selby and Scarborough (see ‘local support and advice’ on page 17 and 18).
Further information

Helpful literature on the Internet


Specialist aids for eating and drinking

Alzheimer’s Society Online Shop: https://shop.alzheimers.org.uk/ [Accessed April 2019]


Complete Care Shop: https://www.completecareshop.co.uk/eating-aids/ [Accessed April 2019]
Local support and advice

**Alzheimer’s Society Selby and York**
Tel: 01904 929444  
Email: yorkservices@alzheimers.org.uk

**Alzheimer’s Society Scarborough**
Tel: 01723 500958  
Email: scarborough@alzheimers.org.uk

**Age UK York**
Tel: 01904 627995  
Email: ageukyork@ageukyork.org.uk

**Age UK Scarborough and District**
Tel: 01723 379058  
Email: reception@ageukscarborough.org
Caring about what we do ● Respecting and valuing each other

Dementia Forward
North Yorkshire: 03300578592
York: 019014 692473
Email: help@dementiaforward.org.uk

Here Now Dementia
Tel: 07905 117108
Email: enquiries@herenow.org.uk

York Carers Forum
Tel: 01904 422437
Email: yorkcarersforum@yahoo.co.uk

Scarborough and Ryedale Carers Resource
Tel: 01723 850155
Email: staff@carersresource.net

The above telephone numbers, websites and email addresses are correct at the time of publication.

Acknowledgements

This booklet is based on information produced by and used with permission of the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics at Airedale NHS Foundation Trust
Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact: Mrs Heidi Seaward, Office Manager, Nutrition and Dietetic Department, Scarborough Hospital Woodlands Drive, Scarborough, YO12 6QL, Tel: 01723 342415 or email heidi.seaward@york.nhs.uk.

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PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email pals@york.nhs.uk.

An answer phone is available out of hours.
Providing care together in York, Scarborough, Bridlington, Malton, Selby and Easingwold communities

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01904 725566
email: access@york.nhs.uk

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