

# Nutrition

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. Undernourished 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. Some of the changes a person with dementia may experience may include:

- Loss of appetite
- Developing an insatiable appetite or a craving for sweets
- Forgetting to eat and drink
- Forgetting how to chew or swallow
- A dry mouth, or mouth discomfort
- Reduction in the ability to recognise or refuse the food and drink they are offered

## Daily nutritional balance

The nutritional requirements of someone with dementia will be similar to other people of their age. However, those who experience increased physical activity such as pacing, will need larger amounts of nutrients to try to minimise weight loss.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines for older people refers refers to those between 65–75 years, without complex medical conditions and who aren't frail. For this group, it is recommended to:

- Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods
- Eat at least three meals every day

- Drink plenty of water
- Eat plenty of vegetables (including legumes) and fruit
- Eat plenty of cereals, bread and pastas
- Eat a diet low in saturated fats
- Choose foods low in salt and using salt sparingly
- Include foods high in calcium
- Use added sugars in moderation

For older, frail people, or those with complex medical conditions it is recommended that:

- Dietary restrictions, such as low fat or diabetic diets, are avoided (dietary restrictions to manage allergies and intolerances should continue)
- Sugar, salt or fat can be added to the food and drink offered to increase the taste and nutritional content
- Regular meals, snacks and drinks are offered

### **Some common problems**

Some people with dementia may forget to eat or drink.

#### **What to try**

- An alarm clock, or a phone call, may be a useful reminder for meal and snack times
- 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**

- Family and friends helping to prepare meals and/or eating together (meals should be shared social occasions whenever possible)
- Home delivered ready-to-eat food from restaurants, meals-on-wheels or fast food outlets. 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
- Preparing large quantities of food, then freezing into meal size portions
- Eating out. However, check first that the person with dementia will be comfortable with the venue and food
- 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 increase 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. Try using a fancy or preferred glass, and involve the person with dementia in the process of making the drink
- 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 with the fingers (you may initially need to help the fingers to convey food from the plate to the mouth)
- Make sure that the food is accessible and the plate is in comfortable reaching distance. Put food on a flat plate with no pattern so that the food can be seen clearly

- Don't use complicated table settings and serve only one plate of food at a time. Avoid using lots of different cutlery, crockery, glasses, foods and drinks together
- Impairment to taste and smell senses can reduce appetite. The preparation of tasty, strongly flavoured and aromatic food or condiments may help
- Allow time for the memory to respond
- 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, 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:**

Finger foods for independence; For people with Alzheimer's disease and other eating difficulties, by Lois Newton and Dr Alan Stewart;

Reduce the risk: A common sense guide to preventing poor nutrition in older people, by Carolyn Bunney and Rudi Bartl;

Best Practice Food and Nutrition Manual for Aged Care Homes Edition 2, by Carolyn Bunney and Rudi Bartl; and,

Volkert D, et al. ESPEND guidelines on nutrition in dementia. Clinical Nutrition (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.clnu.2015.09.004>

## Who can help?

A dietitian or doctor can advise you about good nutrition. Your local hospital, community health service, Carer Gateway, or your doctor can put you in touch with a dietitian.

Information on aged care can be found on the My Aged Care website [myagedcare.gov.au](https://myagedcare.gov.au)

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**.

Thanks to Cathy Thesing (Leading Nutrition) for reviewing this material.

### Further Information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**, or visit our website at [dementia.org.au](https://dementia.org.au)



For language assistance phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**