

Eating

This help sheet provides a number of practical strategies for people caring for someone with dementia who is having problems eating.

Meal times provide us with an opportunity to spend time with our family and friends, as well as sharing food together. When caring for someone with dementia meal times can sometimes become stressful. Loss of memory and problems with judgement can cause difficulties in relation to eating and nutrition for many people with dementia.

There are many ways to improve the situation.

Loss of appetite

Forgetting how to chew and swallow, ill-fitting dentures, insufficient physical activity and being embarrassed by difficulties can all result in a loss of appetite.

What to try

- Ensure there are no treatable causes for loss of appetite, such as acute illness or depression
- Offer meals at regular times each day
- Allow the person to eat when hungry
- Encourage physical exercise
- Provide balanced meals to avoid constipation
- Offer ice cream or milk shakes
- Try to prepare familiar foods in familiar ways, especially foods that are favourites
- Encourage eating all or most of one food before moving on to the next: some people can become confused when the tastes and textures change
- Try to make mealtimes simple, relaxed and calm. Be sure to allow enough time for a meal. Assisting a very impaired person can take up to an hour

- Consult a doctor if there is a significant weight loss
- Check with the doctor about vitamin supplements

Overeating or insatiable appetite

What to try

- Leaving snack foods on the table may be enough to satisfy some people
- Try 5–6 small meals each day
- Have low calorie snacks available, such as apples and carrots
- Consider whether other activities such as walks, or increased social contacts may help
- Lock some foods in cupboards, if necessary

Sweet cravings

What to try

- Check medications for side effects. Some antidepressant medications can cause a craving for sweets
- Try milk shakes, egg nogs or low calorie ice cream

Mouth, chewing and swallowing problems

Some causes of problems with eating may relate to the mouth. A dry mouth, or mouth discomfort from gum disease or ill-fitting dentures are common problems.

What to try

- Have a dental check up of gums, teeth and dentures
- Moisten food with gravies and sauces if a dry mouth is causing problems
- For chewing problems, try light pressure on the lips or under the chin, tell the person when to chew, demonstrate chewing, moisten foods or offer small bites one at a time
- For swallowing problems, remind the person to swallow with each bite, stroke the throat gently, check the mouth to see if food has been swallowed, do not give foods which are hard to swallow, offer smaller bites and moisten food
- Consult the doctor if choking problems develop

At the table

Pouring a glass of juice into a bowl of soup, buttering the serviette or eating dessert with a knife indicate that a person with dementia is having difficulty at the dinner table.

What to try

- Serve one course at a time and remove other distracting items from the table such as extra cutlery glasses or table decorations
- Ensure that the crockery is plain and is a different colour to the plain table cloth and the food being served
- If the use of cutlery is too difficult serve finger food
- Eat with the person with dementia so that they can copy you
- Make sure that they are not rushed
- Keep noise and activities in the environment to a minimum
- Ensure there is adequate lighting
- Serve familiar food

Other considerations

- Keep eating simple. Not all food has to be eaten with cutlery if this is becoming difficult. Finger food can be a nutritious and easy alternative
- Keep in mind a person's past history with food. They may have always had a small appetite, been a voracious eater or had a sweet tooth
- Watch food temperatures. While warm food is more appetising, some people with dementia have lost the ability to judge when food is hot or cold. Beware of using Styrofoam cups which not only hold the heat for a long time, but also tip over easily
- Spoiled food in the refrigerator, hiding food or not eating regularly may all be signs that someone living alone is in need of more support
- Many people with dementia do not get enough fluids because they may forget to drink or may no longer recognise the sensation of thirst. Be sure to offer regular drinks of water, juice or other fluids to avoid dehydration

- Many eating problems are temporary and will change as the person's abilities deteriorate

Adapted from **Understanding difficult behaviours** by Anne Robinson, Beth Spencer and Laurie White.

Who can help?

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**.

Carer Gateway provide free and confidential information on local carer support, disability and community services. Contact Carer Gateway on **1800 422 737** or visit carergateway.gov.au

Information on aged care can be found on the My Aged Care website myagedcare.gov.au

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



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