



# IMPROVING THE EATING HABITS OF A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA

## A note from the Editor...

These days it's widely recognised that one of the best ways to protect our immune systems and stay healthy (along with regular exercise and sufficient sleep) is to eat a balanced diet. We need to eat our five-a-day and there is no shortage of information on the right foods we need to eat for good health. This can be a challenge for many people due to our busy lifestyles. Ensuring that the nutrition habits of a person with dementia are healthy and balanced can be an even bigger challenge.

In some cases, person with dementia can be prone to a variety of unhealthy eating patterns. This can include loss of appetite, irregular eating habits and intense cravings for sweet foods.

I saw this first-hand with my mother, who had vascular dementia. In the earlier stages of her dementia, she lost a worrying amount of weight (though some people with dementia can gain weight). I wasn't living with mum so it was impossible for me to observe her eating habits 24 hours a day, but her cupboards and fridge told me that all was not well. There was no fruit or veg in the house and her cupboards were bulging with half-eaten biscuits, chocolate bars and endless bags of crisps. I felt sure she

was snacking and not eating healthy, balanced meals. I managed to resolve this in a variety of ways, which I explain further on in this guide.

I know first hand what a huge challenge it is to encourage a person with dementia to eat a healthy diet. They may feel less inclined to eat bigger meals and may prefer to snack. They may be bored and use sweets or chocolate to help combat restlessness, leading to weight gain. They may become confused about how to consume food. In the later stages of their dementia, they may struggle to use cutlery or identify the foods on their plate. Eating meals together or watching them eat will help you identify any difficulties they may be facing.

This guide explains how appetite and eating habits can change in a person with dementia, and what you can do to make sure they follow the healthiest diet possible.

## Issues with food

If you are caring for a person with dementia, one of the many challenges you may face is how to ensure they get a balanced diet and receive all the nutrients they need for optimum health and wellbeing. A person with dementia can face a number of issues when it comes to food, for a whole host of reasons – some of them due to behavioural changes and some of them due to physical changes.

It's not uncommon for the person to experience an increase in cravings and consume excessive quantities of sweets, chocolate and cakes. According to Alzheimer's Association, taste buds can diminish when the disease takes hold and insulin levels in the brain can drop, causing these cravings. This could also lead to weight gain and unhealthy eating patterns. Recent studies have shown that as dementia progresses, it attacks part of the brain responsible for self-restraint in our diets. Incidentally, many experts now believe there is a clear link between Type 2 diabetes and Alzheimer's disease.

However, it's also possible that a person with dementia can lose weight. My mother wasn't getting the nutrients she needed and lost weight, so it was clear I needed to ensure she had access to healthy foods and her eating habits had to be improved. If you have Meals On Wheels in your area, it can be a good

option if the person lives alone and you don't think they are eating proper balanced dinners. It worked very well for my mum. When she began receiving hot meals daily, her weight increased to



a more stable level, and I saw a noticeable effect on her overall health.

## Food storage

However, she did suffer from frequent stomach upsets. A quick scan through her fridge and cupboards revealed why. Foods were not being safely stored and were out of date in many instances. Foods that should have been stored in the fridge, like cheese and cured meats, were left uncovered in cupboards. Foods that belonged in the freezer were being stored in the fridge and then cooked and mum was regularly eating foods that were out of date.





Eating meals with the person as much as you can and monitoring their eating habits may help you address any issues. In fact, many dementia experts advise eating meals together which will hopefully give the person the incentive to eat what's in front of them.

Forgetting to eat could be another issue. If the person lives alone, you may want to ring them at set times and prompt them or

arrange for someone to go in and make them meals or snacks. It's also important to ensure they have enough food in the house, especially if they live alone and don't venture out very frequently. My mother lived more than an hour

On every visit, I would routinely check mum's fridge and cupboards and discard old foods that would have made her ill. She resented it, but was no longer able to comprehend why out of date foods could not be eaten, and why meat had to be safely covered and kept in the fridge.

## Dealing with distractions

Distractions at mealtimes can cause problems with eating. If the person with dementia is trying to eat a meal in a noisy environment, like a busy restaurant or the communal lounge in a residential home, they may be easily distracted from eating by what's going on. The sight of other people coming in and out of the room, talking to them or greeting them, or other activities going on around them, can distract them from the food on their plate. Once they are distracted, they may forget that food is in front of them. Try to eat in a quiet space when you can.

## REASONS FOR LOSS OF APPETITE

A person with dementia may experience an apparent loss of appetite, and this could be due to various reasons according to Alzheimer's Society, including depression, fatigue, and lack of activity or constipation.

- Seek medical help from the person's GP if you think they may be depressed as they may be offered medication to help with their mood and wellbeing.
- If the person is tired, they may not be able to concentrate on what they are eating and it may be better to give them smaller

portions more regularly, instead of three square meals a day.

- If the person hasn't been active during the day, then encouraging them to be physically active – be it walking, dancing, exercise classes or any form of exercise that's safe for them to do which they enjoy – may help to stimulate their appetite.
- Confusion – if the person isn't sure about the food in front of them or how to use cutlery then they may not want to eat. Cut food up, assist with feeding if they let you or give them prompts about the food on their plate.





away from me, so apart from her daily Meals On Wheels, I also used a home delivery grocery service (whom I paid directly) to

ensure there were plenty of healthy snacks (and the occasional treat!) in the house at all times. This meant there was no chance of an empty cupboard and mum always had access to food without needing to go to the shops if she felt too tired or unwell to venture outside.

When you are eating with the person you may need to cut their food into small pieces to make eating easier. They may resent you doing this and point out they don't need help. A little diplomacy can go a long way. I didn't want my mum to feel incapable of cutting up her own food, even though she was. When cutting up meat, I used to say: 'This meat is quite tough' which was my way of justifying why she might need some assistance.

As the person's dementia progresses, it's advisable to monitor them eating to make sure they can still use cutlery properly. It's not uncommon in the mid or later stages of dementia for the person to forget how to use cutlery, or use the wrong cutlery. They may try to use a knife or a fork when a spoon would be more appropriate. If a spoon is the best choice, then make sure they only have a spoon in front of them.

## Issues with sight

It's also important to be aware that dementia can affect sight. Although we see with our eyes, the brain has to process what we see. This means that a person may see something on their plate and not know what it is. Or they may attempt to eat the wrong items – such as trying to eat a folded napkin instead of a sandwich (I witnessed this with my mother). If they seem unsure of what they should be eating, they may need guidance.

Colours may help too. For instance, if they eat at a white table, put food on a blue plate to make it stand out.

In the later stages of the illness, you may need to cut food up or puree vegetables. Give them plenty of time to eat and don't take their plate away from them too soon.

## TOP TIPS FOR IMPROVING THE EATING HABITS OF A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA

- Check cupboards and fridges to make sure food is in date and being stored appropriately
- Make sure they always have access to healthy food and their cupboards and fridge are both well stocked – Meals On Wheels and ordering food online for regular deliveries can help, especially in bad weather when the person doesn't want to go out
- Eat meals with the person so that you can monitor their eating habits and make sure they are coping with cutlery and cutting up food
- Make meals a social occasion so that they associate eating with pleasure
- Cut food up if they are struggling with cutlery
- Point out food on their plate if they seem unsure of what they are eating – a diplomatic approach could be something like: 'That salmon looks lovely'
- Always make sure they stay well hydrated in order to help prevent infections – if they dislike water, try diluting it with fruit juices or cordials
- If you take them out for Sunday lunch, encourage them to eat and indulge in the food
- If you suspect they are having trouble swallowing or chewing food, speak to their GP immediately – they may refer to the person to a speech and language therapist or a nutritional therapist

A person with dementia can have difficulty swallowing in the later stages of their illness, so try to offer them moist foods that are easy to eat and make sure the person is seated upright when eating. Encourage them to chew food carefully and do all you can to limit distractions. Signs of swallowing problems include chest infections, repeated coughing and clearing of the throat, fear during eating, grimacing when swallowing or exaggerated movements of the jaw after chewing.

Make sure foods aren't too hot or too cold – if food is too hot they may not necessarily be aware of this and may not think to check that it's at a safe temperature.

Weight loss in the later stages of dementia is common, which can affect the immune system and make it more difficult for the person to fight infections. Always make sure they are fully hydrated and continue to encourage them to eat and monitor them at mealtimes as much as you can.



## Come to The Alzheimer's Show for one-to-one practical advice and support

The Alzheimer's Show takes place at London's Olympia on 5-6 June 2020. The event brings the dementia community together under one roof, offering help and hope, practical advice and informative workshops for families, carers and healthcare professionals. Come along and meet our team of experts, take part in practical workshops aimed at improving your understanding of dementia, and speak to our Admiral Nurses in person for advice on coping with being a carer.

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:  
**[www.alzheimersshow.co.uk](http://www.alzheimersshow.co.uk)**