



# EATING WELL WITH DEMENTIA



# Why is it important for people with dementia to eat well?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health for us all.

Good nutrition can help the body to maintain and improve strength, stay mobile and keep up independence, but illness and old age can put a strain on the body.

Many people living with dementia may experience a change in their relationship with food, eating and drinking. As dementia progresses, the behavioural, emotional and physical changes that occur can make eating and drinking more difficult. Depending on the individual, these changes can result in dehydration, weight loss or weight gain.

As a carer this can be upsetting and you may find it reassuring to understand how you can help the person you care for to eat and drink well.

There are some simple ways that you can help a person with dementia to enjoy meal times and get the best from their diet.

This booklet is for anyone caring for a person with dementia and provides useful information and tips on how to help them eat well.

# What is dementia?

Dementia is the term used to describe a collection of symptoms, including memory loss, mood changes and problems with speech and understanding. These symptoms occur when the brain is damaged by certain diseases, including Alzheimer's Disease.

Dementia is progressive, which means the symptoms will gradually get worse.

Each person will experience dementia in a different way. People may have similar symptoms but the degree to which they affect each individual may vary.

Some common symptoms of dementia include the following:

- **Memory loss** – especially short term, for example, forgetting what happened earlier in the day or the way home from the shops.
- **Mood changes** – people living with dementia may become withdrawn, agitated or scared about what is happening to them.
- **Problems with speech and understanding** – for example, difficulties finding the correct words for things.

As we age, many people notice their memory gets worse and sometimes it is unclear if this is normal ageing or a sign of dementia. However, most of us will remember something related to what has been forgotten. If your loved one is developing dementia they will not have any recall related to the object or event in question.





# How can dementia affect diet and nutrition?

As dementia progresses a person may find it more difficult to eat and drink for many different reasons. The difficulties experienced will vary; some people with dementia will have a poor appetite or difficulty chewing and swallowing, whilst others may overeat.

## Weight loss

In some cases a person living with dementia may lose weight unintentionally due to a variety of reasons, including the following:

- **Poor appetite** — people with dementia may have a poor appetite for several reasons. Mood changes can affect a person's feeling towards food and some may no longer enjoy the food they are used to eating. Problems with chewing or swallowing, or coordination changes can make eating difficult and put people off their food. Depression is also common when someone becomes aware they have dementia, and this can sometimes lead to a loss of appetite.
- **Chewing and swallowing problems** — sore mouth and gums, or ill-fitting dentures, can make it difficult to eat. Some people may also struggle to communicate to you that they are experiencing these changes and will simply stop eating as much as a result of their discomfort, leading to weight loss.



- **Changes in food preferences** — as dementia progresses, a person's like and dislikes for food may change. This can affect the amount and variety of foods eaten.
- **Coordination problems** — eating using cutlery or drinking from a glass can become difficult due to coordination problems. This can make mealtimes a challenge and take the pleasure out of eating and drinking.
- **Increased energy needs** — some people with dementia may be very active or like to walk around a lot and, as a result, they will use more energy and could start losing weight if they do not increase the amount they eat.
- **Independent living** — if someone is living alone they may find it challenging to prepare food or may forget to eat the food they have, especially if it is not visible and readily accessible.

## Weight gain

Alternatively, some people living with dementia may eat too much and gain excess weight. This can be due to:

- **Changes in food preferences** — some people favour higher calorie, sugary foods, which may cause weight gain.
- **Memory loss** — people with dementia may sometimes forget they have already eaten and, therefore, duplicate meals or snacks, causing them to overeat.
- **Grazing** — if food is visible and available some people might graze throughout the day without being able to keep track of what they have already eaten, e.g. boxes of chocolates, fruit bowls, etc.
- **Boredom and stress** — if people are going through periods of boredom, stress or loneliness, they may comfort eat.

# Eating well for people with dementia

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health. This includes eating foods from all of the different food groups, to provide the body with the nutrients it needs. If you are involved in preparing meals for someone with dementia, the following food group guide may be useful.

## PROTEIN

**Function:** The body's building blocks, essential for maintaining muscle mass, growth and repair.

**Sources:** Meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, tofu, beans, lentils.

- Try to include a portion of protein with at least two meals a day.
- Try including oily fish (salmon, tinned sardines/mackerel), which provides healthy omega-3 fats as well as protein.

## STARCH FOODS

**Function:** An excellent source of energy.

**Sources:** Potatoes, bread, pasta, rice, cereal.

- Include a starchy food at each meal.
- Try to choose wholegrain varieties for a good source of fibre too.

## FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

**Function:** An important source of vitamins and minerals, which help support the immune system.

- Aim to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.
- You can use fresh, frozen, or canned – they all count.



## DAIRY FOODS

**Function:** Contain protein and calcium, for bone strength.

**Sources:** Cheese, milk, yogurt, fromage frais, custard.

- Choose low fat options, unless high energy foods are needed.

## HIGH ENERGY

**Function:** Provide energy, but often low in other nutrients.

**Sources:** Chips, fried food, ice cream, fizzy drink, chocolate, cream cakes.

- Try to include healthy fats that can be found in olive oil, avocado, and nuts (including nut pastes).



# Eating well on a budget

**If you are on a budget, there are simple and affordable ways to shop for a healthy, balanced diet...**

- **Use supermarket own brands** as a cheaper alternative to branded products.
- **Look out for offers on foods that keep**, such as tins of pulses or tomatoes.
- **Dried, frozen or canned fruit (in juice) and vegetables** are often cheaper than fresh varieties - and just as healthy.
- **Supermarkets often reduce prices on products that are close to their sell by date** and this can be a great way to pick up a bargain. But be sure you can cook or eat everything you buy (or are able to freeze it) before it goes off.
- **When making meals, prepare large quantities** and freeze the extra portions. This can be a cost and time effective way of maintaining a balanced diet.
- **Tinned sardines and mackerel** are affordable fish that are a good source of omega-3.

When you are caring it is important to make sure you are getting all the financial help you are entitled to. For expert advice contact the Carers UK Adviceline on 0808 808 777 (Monday to Friday 10am-4pm) or [advice@carersuk.org](mailto:advice@carersuk.org).

# Tips to encourage eating

## Poor appetite

There are many ways to stimulate a person's appetite and the following hints and tips can help encourage a person's interest in food:

- Be flexible with mealtimes and make the most of 'good eating times' — different people will have more of an appetite at certain times of the day, whether this is breakfast or teatime.
- Offer small portions of food, more frequently throughout the day.
- Try not to overload the plate with too much food and have a gap between the main meal and dessert.
- Include foods that are familiar to the person and also try new adventurous foods that they may not have had before.
- Make meals look appetising and eye-catching by including different colours, such as a bowl of chopped fruit or mixed vegetables.

## Coordination problems

- Cut up meals into pieces that can be eaten with a spoon to enable people to remain independent when eating.
- Make finger foods\* that can easily be eaten without using cutlery, e.g. small sandwiches, crackers with soft cheese or orange segments. These are ideal for people who have difficulty using cutlery or for those who are restless and like to walk around at mealtimes.

## Changes in food and taste preferences

As dementia progresses, a person's likes and dislikes for different foods may change. Some people may start to enjoy unusual food combinations, such as mixing sweet and savoury flavours. As a carer, it can be difficult to understand these changes and the following tips can help:

- Add a teaspoon of sugar or honey to savoury foods, such as quiches, pies and omelettes.
- Serve sweet sauces (e.g. apple sauce) with a main meal to add sweetness.
- Be adventurous and cook new dishes with herbs and spices.
- Roast vegetables, such as carrots and parsnips with honey.

## Chewing and swallowing problems

It is important to speak to the GP of the person you care for if you are concerned about these problems. Their GP may refer the person you care for to a Speech and Language Therapist, who can assess the chewing and swallowing problems and provide help with managing any difficulties.

## Independent living

- There are services available that deliver ready-made meals to people living in the community who have difficulty preparing their own food. Your local social services team can help you with this.
- Local day centres or lunch clubs can also offer social contact, as well as a nutritious meal.

\*For further finger food ideas go to [www.carersuk.org/nutrition](http://www.carersuk.org/nutrition)



# Tips for gaining weight or improving nutritional intake

Some people living with dementia may struggle to eat enough for a variety of reasons and this can lead to weight loss. Here are some practical ways to help improve their nutritional intake:

- Offer small, frequent meals and snacks every 2-3 hours.
- Encourage the intake of foods high in calories and protein, for example: meat, fish, eggs and full fat dairy products (like milk, yoghurt and cheese).
- Offering snacks such as biscuits, cakes, chocolate, nuts or crackers may be useful.
- Avoid offering drinks with meals, which may reduce how much is eaten.
- Offer nourishing drinks based on milk, such as Complan, to increase energy and protein intake.

# Tips for losing weight and eating a balanced diet

A small amount of weight gain is OK, but if weight gain becomes excessive it is important to talk to their GP about these changes. The following tips can help a person with dementia to manage or lose weight:

- Replace high fat and sugary foods with starchy options, which provide plenty of energy to fuel the person you care for through the day, such as porridge at breakfast or granary bread for your sandwich.
- Everything in moderation. There is no need to cut out any food group, as long as you control portions. For example, you can provide smaller portions by using a small plate.
- Keep high calorie foods out of sight and provide healthy snacks, such as whole grain crackers, pieces of cut up fruit and vegetables, and low fat yoghurt.
- Encourage the person you care for to do activities they enjoy, to reduce their boredom and stress. Even just going out for a walk can relieve some stress.



# What happens if food is not enough?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet plays a key role in keeping the body strong. Dementia can lead to behavioural, emotional and physical changes that can make it hard to get enough food and can result in your body becoming weaker.

## What is medical nutrition?

Medical nutrition products are specialised foods designed to meet the nutritional needs of those living with a medical condition, recovering from an illness or operation, or those who have become weak and frail over time. They are often referred to as Oral Nutritional Supplements (ONS) and are typically used for those who find it difficult to get adequate nutrition from a normal diet alone.

The nutritional composition of ONS is based on extensive scientific and clinical research, and in many cases its use is recommended in international and professional guidelines. Products are generally available in the form of a powder or liquid drink containing energy, protein, vitamins and minerals.

Medical nutrition products are usually prescribed by a healthcare professional and must be used under medical supervision.

## What are the different types of oral nutritional supplements available

ONS are available in a variety of formats and styles, including milkshake-, juice-, yogurt-, and dessert-style, as well as a variety of flavours to suit different taste preferences.

**Nutrient-dense, low volume** ONS are sometimes recommended for those who are unwell or are recovering from illness. These milkshake style drinks can help make it easier to get the energy and nutrients needed, even if the person you care for has a small appetite or is not feeling well. Many people find it difficult to finish large volumes of drinks and a low volume ONS may be preferred in these cases.

If you have any questions about the use of medical nutrition products, please speak to your healthcare professional. Further information can be found at [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org) or by calling the Nutricia Resource Centre on 0845 250 1011.

## Speak to their GP

If you are worried the person you are caring for is struggling with a normal diet, the practical tips within this leaflet can help improve nutritional intake with food. You could also ask a pharmacist whether a nutritional drink in a powdered format, such as Complan, available from supermarkets and pharmacies, is a suitable option alongside normal foods and drinks. However, should you continue to be concerned about the nutritional intake of the person you care for, please speak to their GP or other healthcare professional about your concerns and whether medical nutrition is right for them.

Further information can be found at [www.carersuk.org/nutrition](http://www.carersuk.org/nutrition), by calling the Nutricia helpline on 0845 250 1011.



# About Carers UK

## However caring affects you and your family, we're here

As the UK's only national membership charity for carers, we're a supportive community and a movement for change.

We give expert advice, information and support.

We connect carers so no one has to care alone.

We campaign together for lasting change.

We innovate to find new ways to reach and support carers.

Visit our website to join us, support us or get information and advice on caring:

**[www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)**

Carers UK Adviceline: **0808 808 7777**

(Monday to Friday, 10am-4pm)

**[advice@carersuk.org](mailto:advice@carersuk.org)**



# About Nutricia

Nutricia Advanced Medical Nutrition specialises in the delivery of medical nutrition products and services for all who need it, spanning from the very young to the elderly. We supply high quality feeds, equipment and support services to patients and healthcare professionals. Through our Nutricia Homeward service we deliver feeds, feeding pumps, equipment and nursing care direct to patients' homes.

# Carers UK and Nutricia

Carers UK is working in partnership with Nutricia Advanced Medical Nutrition to help improve understanding about nutrition and caring. The partnership provides carers with information and resources on nutritional care for both themselves and the person they care for.

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Carers UK includes Carers Wales, Carers Scotland and Carers NI – visit our website to find out more and get in touch: [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org).

This leaflet has been produced by Nutricia Advanced Medical Nutrition Ltd. The information in this leaflet is for guidance only and is not an authoritative statement of the law. The information is correct as of April 2016.

Carers UK is a charity registered in England and Wales (246329) and in Scotland (SC039307) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (864097). Registered office 20 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4LX.

SCC2979-04/16

