

A guide to good nutrition in dementia for patients and carers

Nutrition and Dietetics

Patient Information Leaflet

What is dementia?

Dementia is a term for a group of related symptoms that are associated with an on-going decline of the brain and its abilities. Symptoms of dementia include loss of memory, confusion and problems with speech, understanding and behaviour.

Most cases of dementia are caused by damage to the structure of the brain. People with a diagnosis of dementia may need help from friends or relatives, including help in making decisions.

How common is dementia?

There are about 850,000 people in the UK with dementia (Alzheimer's Society, 2018). Dementia usually occurs in people who are aged 65 or over. The older you get, the more likely you are to develop it.

What are the types of dementia?

There are many types of dementia which each differ slightly. The main types are:

- **Alzheimer's disease** – where small clumps of protein, known as plaques, begin to develop around brain cells. This disrupts the working of the brain.
- **Vascular dementia** – where problems with blood circulation result in parts of the brain not getting enough oxygen.
- **Dementia with Lewy Bodies** – where abnormal collections of protein, known as Lewy Bodies, develop inside the nerve cells of the brain.

What are the stages of dementia?

Early stage

Dementia usually begins gradually with very minor changes in the person's abilities or behaviour. At the time, such signs are often mistaken for other things such as depression, stress, bereavement or, in older people, to the normal process of ageing. Loss of memory for recent events is a common early sign. Someone with dementia may:

- Forget about events and recent conversations and repeat themselves.
- Become slower at grasping new ideas, or lose the thread of what is being said, sometimes becoming confused.
- Show poor judgement or find it harder to make decisions.
- Lose interest in other people or activities.
- Develop a readiness to blame others for taking mislaid items.
- Become unwilling to try out new things or adapt to change.

Middle stage

As dementia progresses, the changes become more obvious. The person will need more support to help them manage their day-to-day living. They may need frequent reminders or help to eat. Symptoms may include:

- Becoming confused about where they are, or wandering off and becoming lost.
- Becoming muddled about time and getting up at night because they are mixing up night and day.
- Becoming increasingly upset, angry or agitated, due to frustration and a loss of confidence.
- Putting themselves or others at risk through their forgetfulness – for example, by not lighting the gas on the cooker.
- Behaving in ways that may seem unusual, such as going outside in their nightclothes.
- Experiencing difficulty with vision and perception which can lead to problems identifying people, and in some cases hallucinations.

Late stage

At this stage, the person with dementia will need even more help and will gradually become totally dependent on others for nursing care. Loss of memory may become very pronounced, with the person unable to recognise familiar objects or surroundings or even those closest to them, although there may be sudden flashes of recognition. Symptoms may include:

- Becoming very frail. They may start to shuffle or walk unsteadily, eventually becoming confined to bed or a wheelchair.
- Difficulty in eating and sometimes swallowing.
- Considerable weight loss.
- Incontinence, losing control of their bladder and sometimes their bowels as well.
- Gradual loss of speech, they may repeat a few words or cry out from time to time.

Why is nutrition important?

A healthy balanced diet provides all the nutrients the body needs in the right amounts to stay fit and well. Eating a nutritious balanced diet and maintaining a healthy body weight is just as important for people with dementia as anyone else.

Eating healthily does not mean that certain foods have to be avoided. Everything in moderation and a little bit of what you fancy is the key to enjoying food and staying fit and well.

The Eatwell guide below shows the main food groups we need to include to achieve a healthy balanced diet. By eating a selection of foods from all of the groups on the Eatwell plate, a balanced diet can be achieved that includes sources of protein, carbohydrate, fat, vitamins and minerals.



Source: Public Health England in association with the Welsh Government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland

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Difficulties with eating in dementia

As dementia progresses, people may have difficulty eating and drinking. These difficulties may vary from one person to another but the health of people with dementia may get worse, and they may lose weight.

The most common causes for difficulties with eating in dementia are:

- A poor appetite
- Difficulties with chewing and swallowing
- Changes in foods preferred
- Problems with co-ordination
- In the later stages of dementia, they may not be able to recognise food or know why they should eat it

Overcoming difficulties with eating in dementia

Some people with dementia may struggle to eat enough throughout the day and may suffer from a poor appetite. It is important to get a balanced diet and to maintain a healthy weight. Here are a few suggestions of things you can do:

- Include snacks and nourishing drinks between meals, such as milky drinks, scones, malt loaf, cakes, crumpets, yoghurts, custard-based puddings, and cheese and crackers.
- Use full fat varieties of foods rather than diet versions.

If a person is eating less, it is important to encourage them to eat as nourishing a diet as possible. You may want to try adding the following foods to their normal diet to increase the calorie and protein content:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| - Full fat milk | - Condensed milk |
| - Skimmed milk powder | - Full fat yoghurts |
| - Cheese | - Custard |
| - Butter | - Ice cream |
| - Cream | - Jam, honey and syrups |

Make enriched milk by adding two to four tablespoons of milk powder to a pint (600ml) of full fat milk.

Difficulties with chewing and swallowing

Poor dental health or ill-fitting dentures (false teeth) can affect a person's ability to chew or eat certain foods. Some people may not be able to tell you that they have toothache and may simply refuse food if it hurts to eat. Regular dental care is vital to ensure that gums and teeth are healthy and that dentures fit well. It is important that their teeth or dentures are cleaned well, on a regular basis.

If it is noticeable that a person is having difficulty with swallowing, they should see a speech and language therapist. Signs to look out for to suggest that a person has difficulty swallowing are that they may:

- hold food in their mouth
- chew continuously
- cough during or after eating

In this case, their GP should refer them to a speech and language therapist.

If the person is having difficulty chewing or swallowing food, it may be worth considering a diet that is easier to eat, such as softer foods or pureed foods.

Changes in foods preferred

People who have dementia may change the types of foods they prefer as dementia progresses. They may start to enjoy flavours and foods that they did not like before or they may take a dislike to food that they have always liked. This may be as a result of damage to specific areas in the brain or a desire for stronger flavours as their taste changes with age.

Suggestions for people whose tastes have changed:

- Add a small amount of sugar or honey to savoury foods.
- Try roasting with honey or adding a honey glaze.
- Be adventurous and cook new dishes that are stronger in flavour or that the person may not have previously experienced.
- Serve sweet sauces or chutneys with main courses.
- Add herbs and spices to your cooking.

Problems with co-ordination

Some people with dementia find eating with cutlery or drinking from a glass difficult because they have problems with co-ordination. This can be frustrating and they may feel embarrassed if they drop food or if the task becomes messy. This can be enough to put a person off eating at mealtimes. The following suggestions may help:

- Cut food up before you serve it so that the person can eat it with a spoon. This allows them to continue to eat independently.
- Use non-slip mats to prevent the plate from sliding on the table.
- Get some equipment that will help such as specially-adapted cutlery.
- If cutlery is difficult to use, offer finger foods which can be easily eaten and, again, enable the person to continue to eat independently.

Ideas for finger foods at each meal time

Breakfast Toast fingers Fruit segments Buttered muffins Pineapple chunks Hardboiled egg – quartered Berries Soft cereal bar Seedless grapes Waffle Dried fruit	Main meal Pieces of meat or fish Quiche slices Slices of pizza Potato wedges Kebabs Chips Fish fingers Small potatoes Fish cakes Green beans, carrots, celery
Lunch Sandwiches Buffet style lunch Cherry tomatoes Pickled onions Cheese on toast Scotch eggs Soup in a mug Pork pies Small bread rolls Vegetable sticks	Puddings Snacks Fruit salad Crackers and cheese Slices of cake Crumpets Individual fruit pies Hot cross buns Biscuits Scone or teacake

Supporting a person with dementia to eat and drink

Here are a few tips and suggestions to help make mealtimes more enjoyable and more nutritious for people with dementia:

- Ensure that mealtimes are relaxed and unhurried. Allow plenty of time.
- Ensure that there are no unnecessary distractions, such as excess noise, or a television left on in the background.
- If a person is agitated or distressed, do not pressurise them to eat or drink. Wait until the person is calm and less anxious before offering food and drink.
- Ensure that the person is alert, comfortable and sitting upright or, if in bed, well-positioned, before offering food and drink.
- Make food and meals look good enough to want to eat. Colourful food such as a bowl of chopped fruit is attractive and eye-catching.
- Try not to overload the plate with too much food. Offer small portions at frequent intervals throughout the day.
- Be flexible and make the most of 'good eating' times. Some people eat better at certain times of the day, whether this is at breakfast or later in the day at teatime.
- If the person appears to have difficulty using cutlery, you may need to prompt the person and guide their hand to their mouth to remind them of the process involved.
- If you have to assist a person to eat and drink, talk about what you are offering them to help remind them of tastes and flavours.
- Do not feel you need to prepare complicated meals. It is probably better to devote your energy to ensuring that the person eats and enjoys their food.

And finally... encourage them to be active, to help build an appetite.

Drinking

Some people with dementia may struggle to drink enough throughout the day and will be at an increased risk of dehydration. It is important for them to drink enough to help maintain hydration and good health. Try the following suggestions:

- Offer gentle prompts and reminders so that the person recognises the drink in front of them.
- Encourage them to use a small glass or cup rather than a mug.
- If they are unsteady, use drinking cups with two handles to allow a steadier grip. These can be bought from chemists or online.
- Offer the cup to the person rather than leaving it on a table.
- Offer small but frequent drinks throughout the day.
- Transfer drinks that are supplied in a carton with a straw to a cup or glass.

Take care when offering 'boiled' hot drinks as some people with dementia cannot tell how hot or cold things are.

Difficulties for carers

If you are caring for a person with dementia who is close to you, your relationship may change greatly as time passes. You may find their behaviour confusing, irritating or difficult to deal with leaving you feeling stressed, irritable or helpless.

In the later stages of dementia, you may find that the person becomes distressed or agitated, especially if they feel threatened in some way. Angry outbursts may occur during close personal care, usually because the person does not understand what is happening. Try not to take this personally.

By learning to understand why this is happening, you will find it easier to stay calm and deal effectively with the challenges that arise.

As the illness progresses, you may also have feelings of grief and bereavement as many changes occur with your family member or friend. It can be difficult for carers or family members to deal with these feelings.

Helpful contacts

When you are caring for someone with dementia, it can be all too easy to ignore your own needs and to forget that you matter too.

However, it is much easier to cope if you look after your own health and wellbeing, and there is lots of support available.

If you want to find out about getting practical help to care for someone with dementia, or just talk to someone about a 'bad day', you can call the dementia helpline for the Alzheimer's Society on 0300 222 1122.

National organisations

Alzheimer's Society

0300 222 1122

<http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/index.php>

Dementia UK

0800 888 6678

<http://www.dementiauk.org/>

Mind

0300 123 3393

<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Local support

Dudley Dementia Gateway

Brett Young Centre, Halesowen

01384 813600

The Crystal Gateway, Brierley Hill

Central Dudley

01384 813315

Dudley Alzheimer's Society

0121 521 3021

Or email at: BlackCountryOffice@alzheimers.org

This service offers a range of support for Alzheimer sufferers and their carers including home based respite, social groups, practical and emotional one to one support for carers and monthly carer support meetings.

This booklet is based on information provided from the Alzheimer's Society.

Reference

Alzheimer's Society (2014) *Dementia UK: Update. Second Edition.*
Peterborough: Alzheimer's Society.

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please contact:

Dietetics Department at Russells Hall Hospital on 01384 244017
(8.30am to 4.30pm, Monday to Friday)

Older People's Mental Health Team at Russells Hall Hospital on
01384 456111 ext. 3567 (8am to 4pm, 7 days a week)

Community dietitians at Stourbridge Health and Social Care Centre on
01384 323749 (9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday)

Russells Hall Hospital switchboard number: 01384 456111

This leaflet can be downloaded or printed from:

<http://dudleygroup.nhs.uk/services-and-wards/>

If you have any feedback on this patient information leaflet, please email
dgft.patient.information@nhs.net

This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 073 0510.

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