

Alzheimer's Foundation of America

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Eating and Dementia

A good diet is vital to a person's health and well-being, but eating with Alzheimer's or dementia can be difficult. Because the brain is involved in all aspects of eating, when parts of it are damaged by disease, a person can have trouble eating. Some may not want to eat and others may not be able to feed themselves. Some may even forget how to chew and swallow. When a person with dementia can't eat, they don't get the nutrition they need to stay healthy, comfortable and strong.



Here are 7 tips to assist individuals living with dementia with eating:

1. Keep to a routine



For individuals living with dementia, many things may interfere with both interest in eating, and the ability to eat. Sequencing the steps involved in eating might be hard, or interest in food may have diminished. Encourage and support your loved one to participate as fully and enjoyably as possible in mealtimes. Keeping to a routine, eating at the same time every day, and in the same place, is reassuring and provides a structured, safe and predictable environment. If the individual lives alone, make sure there are reminders to eat. You can check out *The Apartment: A Guide to Creating a Dementia-Friendly Home*, for suggestions on devices that provide these reminders.

2. Make it appealing



Make the food preparation a social event. Invite your person into the kitchen while you are cooking. The aromas are a powerful appetite stimulator and socializing is interactive and comforting. If possible, create a small task for the individual- setting the table, cutting up vegetables, folding napkins- all reinforce a sense of autonomy and belonging. Try to create nutritious menus that incorporate all the food groups to ensure health and well-being. Be sure to limit the use of sugar and salt, and include flavorful spices and herbs that appeal to taste buds. Fruits, vegetables and nuts all have benefits such as antioxidants and Omega-3 fatty acids that boost brain health. Always include food your loved one enjoys eating! Foods (and their aromas) hold and trigger emotional memories, and can bring back treasured memories of shared meals and moments.

3. Make their favorites



A person may be more likely to eat a meal which they've always liked, and which they associate with positive emotions. Sometimes they may become fixated on a certain meal for a period of time. This is okay — it is often better that they eat the same meal for few days in a row than if they were to not eat at all. However, it is best to still strive for variety and nutritional value in all meals.

4. Keep it simple

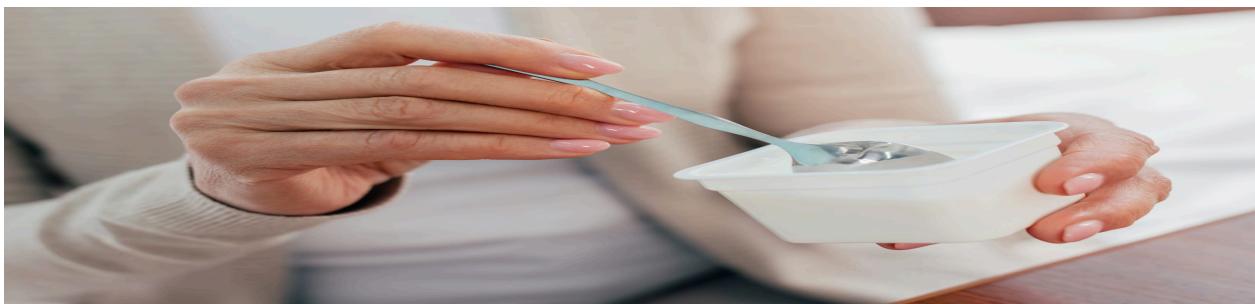


Make eating as easy as possible by organizing the food, plates, and utensils.

Give only one food item at a time. A busy plate can be confusing.

Try one course at a time, served on a single plate or in a single bowl.

5. Use the right utensils



For example, a spoon may make it easier to lift food off the plate and up to the mouth than a fork. Consider using adaptive utensils, such as weighted cutlery, to assist a person with dementia in holding the fork or spoon independently, and to minimize

tremors. Pre-cut foods and finger foods are easiest to manage. Utensils with a silicone coating may be safer to use in some cases.

6. Make sure they can swallow

Usually, if someone with late-stage dementia has difficulty speaking, they also have trouble swallowing. Pay special attention to help ensure they do not choke on their food or beverages. Feed them slowly, and make sure they have swallowed each bite before serving another. Keep a drink ready during meals to help wash down each bite. Ask the individual's healthcare professional for advice on choosing foods that are best suited for someone who has trouble chewing. If a person with dementia has dentures, be sure they use their dentures during meals. There are even cook books designed to assist, including "I-Can't-Chew Cookbook" by J. Randy Wilson.

7. Sit or eat with them

Remember, meals are social events that we all enjoy.

Take time to sit with the person. You can offer companionship and conversation, and if the person needs any reminders or assistance, you'll be there to help.

Have questions or need more information? Contact AFA's Helpline at 866-232-8484 or click the chat icon in the lower right hand corner of this page.

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