Eating and drinking well
Supporting people living with dementia
Losing weight is common in people living with dementia, who may find eating and drinking difficult or refuse food or drink for a number of reasons:

- Problems expressing hunger/thirst, or dislike of a particular food or drink
- A lack of interest in food may be caused by low mood
- Confusion in recognising food and remembering how to eat
- Concentration can be poor, making it difficult to sit down and finish a meal

Other challenges associated with dementia include:

- Reduced thirst sensation
- Limited recognition of hunger
- Paranoia surrounding food
- Difficulties chewing and swallowing

Becoming dehydrated can put older people at risk of many health conditions, such as reduced cognitive status, incontinence, constipation, increased tiredness, low blood pressure, and can increase the risk of falls as a result of dizziness and confusion.

It is recommended to drink around 6-8 glasses (1500ml) of fluid a day, however any increase in fluid intake will be beneficial.

Undernutrition and loss of body mass can cause a more rapid progression of dementia as well as increasing the risk of complications such as pressure sores, infections, and falls and fractures.

This leaflet is designed to provide advice on how to increase food and fluid intake for those living with dementia.
The eating environment

**Sensory cues** such as the smell of food being cooked and setting a table to eat can help people recognise it’s mealtime.

Create a **social** environment at mealtimes and the opportunity to sit around a table together. This increases enjoyment of meals and means some can **copy eating behaviours**.

**Comfortable** environment free from distractions such as loud background noise or TV, unpleasant smells and unnecessary items on the table.

**Positioning** is important – sitting properly will help with chewing and swallowing and prevent feelings of early fullness.

The eating environment

Support people to **eat independently** for as long as possible – guiding their hands, verbal prompts to remind, and the use of tools such as lightweight cups, high sided bowls, plain coloured plates.

Allow more **time** for those with dementia to finish their meals, without making them feel rushed.

Stimulate **interest** and **enjoyment** of food through celebrating special occasions or events (e.g. Chinese New Year), and participating in tea dances, coffee mornings, or curry evenings.

**Increased energy demand**
- Choose full fat products
- Porridge with honey and fruit
- Sponge cake and custard
- Banana milk shake with full milk

**Fortifying food**
- Add honey or jam to porridge toast or yougurt
- Drinking after and between meals
- Chewing gum
- Stronger **flavours**

**Making eating easier**
- Smaller meals
- Softer foods
- Drinking after and between meals
- Chewing gum
- Stronger **flavours**
Communication

Get to know personal preferences – discuss old favourites and family food traditions. Preferences will also likely change as dementia progresses, so do occasional taste tests to see what is liked and disliked.

Get to know life stories, for example any strong memories associated with food or food preparation. Conversations about food can evoke memories and help to establish food preferences.

Show pictures of foods or food packaging to help with recognition and choosing food. Reading a list of options to choose from may be confusing. Allow time for them to answer.

Activity

Physical activity such as moving to music, walking in the garden, or chair based exercises can increase appetite.

Food based activities can help prepare those with dementia for eating and also stimulate hunger:

- Picking herbs or fruit in the garden/watering plants
- Baking – stirring mixture, cake decorating
- Helping prepare vegetables
- Helping with mealtimes – laying the table, gathering dirty dishes
Top tips

**Tastes can change** as dementia develops and **stronger flavours** are often preferred. Try using mild spices and flavour enhancers such as herbs, cheese and Marmite.

People with dementia often prefer **sweeter** foods so try things such as adding honey to porridge, or jam in sandwiches.

Mini meals – providing **smaller portions** at mealtimes and then offering seconds can be less daunting and easier to manage.

Grazing menus/snacks – **finger food** such as sandwich bites, sausage rolls, chopped fruit, and mini rolls can help to increase food intake for those who struggle to concentrate/walk round while eating.

If possible, drinks and snacks could be made **readily available** for people to help themselves to, but individuals should also be encouraged and prompted to eat and drink.

Offer a **variety** of different drinks – tea, coffee, hot chocolate, squash/water served in jugs, ice lollies, and foods with a high water content such as melon and jelly.

Encouragement to drink throughout the day as those with dementia may not be able to sense when they are thirsty. Try making them a drink rather than just offering.

Fortifying food is a good way of getting more calories in without increasing portion size. Try adding things like full-fat milk, cheese, and cream to everyday foods such as mashed potato and soups.
Healthy meals

People living with dementia should be able to enjoy food. Meals and snacks can be adapted in order to meet changing personal preferences, whilst meeting nutritional needs.

People with dementia can aim to have a healthy & balanced diet by eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, basing meals on starchy foods, and having two portions of fish a week. This is the same recommendation for the general population.

Examples of balanced meals could include:

- Porridge with fruit such as berries on top
- Vegetable soup with added cream and a bread roll
- Main meal e.g. mini pizza (with toppings such as vegetables, tuna, or egg), mini quiche, scotch eggs, or mini fish cakes, with potato wedges, carrot sticks, or cucumber sticks.
- Chopped bananas and custard

Where to go for help

If you or someone you know are concerned or are losing weight unintentionally, it’s best to seek individual advice from your Practice Nurse initially, unless you have a medical issue, in which case you should make an appointment with your GP. Your community pharmacist may also be able to provide support and advice.

Your local community organisation (e.g. Age Concern, Age UK) and the council can also provide information, and a range of support options for you.

Email nutrition@wessexahsn.net for more information about malnutrition.

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