

# Eating and drinking in dementia

Patient information



Nutrition  
and dietetics  
Clinical and  
diagnostic services  
centre

This leaflet offers practical advice on how you can help someone with early stage dementia to overcome problems with eating and drinking. If you have any further questions, please speak to a Health Care Professional caring for your relative/ friend.

Many people with dementia have problems with eating and drinking. Food plays a very important part in our lives, so it can be upsetting to see someone we love lose interest in food and lose weight as a consequence.

## Why does this happen?

Some of the most common reasons why people with dementia may stop eating or drinking and some ways that you can help are described below.

| People with dementia may:  | What can help?   |
|--|--|
| <p>Lose their sense of time and forget about meal times.</p> <p>Have difficulties connecting feelings of hunger with eating. They may forget to eat even when food is placed in front of them.</p> <p>Be suspicious about food.</p> <p>Have difficulty preparing meals</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prompting with eating and drinking may help remind them to start eating. Often when a person starts eating they find it easier to continue.</li><li>• Gently placing your hand over theirs to help guide the fork or spoon to their mouth can be helpful.</li><li>• Choose easy to eat meals.</li><li>• Offer reassurance</li><li>• You may want to consider a cook chilled meals delivery service</li></ul> |

| People with dementia may:  | What can help?   |
|--|--|
| <p>Become distracted especially in a busy environment or at a table with lots of people sitting around it.</p> <p>Find it difficult to sit down to a meal and may pace around.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Try 'finger foods' that can be carried around such as sandwiches, cheese portions, buttered scone, fruit such as bananas or grapes, or cake bars</li><li>• Carry drinks in cartons or bottles as they are easier to carry around.</li><li>• Keep mealtimes quiet and calm. Avoid having the television or radio on.</li><li>• Keep food appetising and colourful</li><li>• Avoid using patterned tablecloths; use a separate colour from the plate.</li><li>• Avoid using patterned crockery. Use plain coloured crockery, yellow crockery is recommended to show contrast between food and the plate.</li><li>• Remind your friend or relative when meals are due and try to maintain routine</li></ul> |

| People with dementia may:   | What can help?  |
|---|---|
| <p>Have problems with chewing and swallowing. They may keep food in their mouths without swallowing. Swallowing may become difficult and they may cough or choke when eating.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soft smooth foods are easier to swallow. Ensure the foods are at the right temperature and previously liked by them, but be aware that preferences may change.</li> <li>• Assist with oral care after meals if there is food residue left behind.</li> <li>• If swallowing is a problem and they are coughing, choking or there is more than a mild food residue left, speak with your GP and ask for a referral to a Speech and Language Therapist.</li> <li>• Use safe feeding techniques such as ensuring upright positioning and slow pace of feeding. Use small spoons and don't use force</li> </ul> |
| <p>Experience altered sense of taste and changes in food preferences.</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer a variety of foods.</li> <li>• Try intensely flavoured foods including sweet flavours and condiments.</li> </ul>   |

| People with dementia may:  | What can help?  |
|--|---|
| <p>Find it hard to use a knife and fork and may stop eating because it is physically difficult.</p>                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try foods that can be eaten by hand.</li> <li>• Specially adapted utensils can make eating easier and help to maintain your friend /relative's independence, as long as they recognise the adapted utensils and are able to use them. They may be available from occupational therapy in your area. Ask your GP for more information.</li> </ul>                     |
| <p>Find that some of the medications used can cause a dry mouth or constipation, and therefore be discouraged from eating.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging regular nourishing drinks can help ease a dry mouth and help prevent constipation.</li> <li>• If appetite is poor, avoid high fibre foods as these can make someone feel full.</li> <li>• Using gravy and sauces can make food easier to swallow.</li> <li>• Good daily dental hygiene and mouth care can prevent tooth decay and gum disease</li> </ul> |

## **I am worried that my friend / relative with dementia is losing weight –what can I do?**

There are a variety of supplement drinks (shakes and soups) available from the chemist or supermarket such as Complan and Meritene (previously known as Build-up). If your friend/ relative requires further support, a referral to a Dietitian can be made via your GP. They can offer more tailored and practical advice and provide written information on how to improve the diet of someone who has a small appetite. They may advise on a variety of supplements available on prescription from your friend/ relative's GP. These have extra energy, protein, vitamins and minerals added to them, and can help to provide extra nutrition when appetite is poor.

### **Contact us**

If you have any questions or concerns about eating and drinking difficulties in dementia, please discuss these with the ward team, or the Dementia team, or alternatively please speak with your GP who can refer you to the Dietitian or Speech and Language Therapist as appropriate.

### **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

If you have any questions, problems or concerns about your care or the care of the person you are looking after please contact the ward manager or PALS telephone: 01642 854807 / 01642 282657 or email at [pals@stees.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@stees.nhs.uk)

## **NHS Direct**

Offers health information and advice from specially trained nurses over the phone 24 hours a day. Telephone: 111, Website: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

## **NHS Choices**

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health. Website: [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

## **Alzheimer's Society**

Helpline: 0300 222 11 22, Website: [www.alzheimers.org.uk](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk)

## **Dementia UK**

Helpline: 020 7697 4160, Website: [www.dementiauk.org](http://www.dementiauk.org)

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## Comments, compliments, concerns or complaints

South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is concerned about the quality of care you receive and strives to maintain high standards of health care.

However we do appreciate that there may be an occasion where you, or your family, feel dissatisfied with the standard of service you receive. Please do not hesitate to tell us about your concerns as this helps us to learn from your experience and to improve services for future patients.

## Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

This service aims to advise and support patients, families and carers and help sort out problems quickly on your behalf.

This service is available, and based, at The James Cook University Hospital but also covers the Friarage Hospital in Northallerton, our community hospitals and community health services. Please ask a member of staff for further information.

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