

Helping a Person to Eat and Drink - *Factsheet*

Dementia web 
Information resource for carers, professionals and you

www.dementiaweb.org.uk



Helping a Person to Eat and Drink

Problems eating and drinking

- A person with dementia who has memory loss may not realise that they haven't had a drink or some food for some time. They may stare at food or drink and not make the connection that they need to eat or drink it.
- They may have lost the ability to 'initiate' eating and drinking (be unable to start to do something unprompted or unaided). The person may have very strong beliefs that they are continuing to eat and drink as they always have done.
- Monitoring a person's intake of food and drink is vital. When did you last see the person eating/drinking? If you've made a drink for the person, did you see it being consumed? How much did they consume? How do you keep a note of these details?
- Try to be alert to signs that someone may be very hungry or thirsty – restless, difficult or angry behaviour may be as a result of hunger and/or thirst.
- Look out for signs of dehydration which is a serious threat to a person's health. Signs might be: persistent tiredness, nausea, confusion, back pain, rapid breathing, dry mouth, lethargy, heartburn, muscle weakness, dizziness, headaches, dry eyes, constipation, darker coloured urine.



Maintaining independence

A person with dementia may eat and drink better if:

- There are environmental cues which reinforce the purpose of eating and drinking e.g. sounds and smells associated with food and drink.
- The food and drink that is offered is the person's preferred choice.
- The person does not have an illness that affects appetite or eating.
- There are no distractions whilst eating.
- The crockery is bold coloured, red has proved to be very effective but try any bold colour that especially an older person can easily see.
- Special cutlery is provided for those who have difficulty holding/using cutlery. Using a spoon may be easier than coordinating a knife and fork for some people.

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A few suggestions

- Try to make eating and drinking into a sociable pleasant event – sitting at a table laid with a tablecloth rather than offering food to a person who hasn't moved from a chair.
- Offer a variety of finger foods for a person who can no longer use knives, forks or spoons.
- Direct any artificial light towards what is on the plate to enable a person to see. Or sit a person near a window.
- Timing is so important: If you can hit on the right time for a person with dementia to have a meal you may have more success than offering meals at set times.
- Also try new recipes and flavours as the sense of taste may change with the progression of dementia. Incorporate herbs and spices as methods of giving flavour.
- Share the mealtime experience giving the chance to 'cue' the person into what is happening and 'mirror' your actions.

Dementia Information Service for Carers

Helpline Number **0845 4379901**

Call in normal office hours. Answer phone at other times.

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