

Understanding Nutrition and Dementia: Facility Living

How can dementia affect nutrition?

Many people in supportive living and long-term care need help eating. People with dementia will have a faster rate of mental and physical decline compared to the changes that happen in normal aging. Dementia is progressive, meaning symptoms get worse over time.

Dementia can make it hard to do tasks that were once simple, such as eating. This can put people with dementia at a higher risk of malnutrition.

Understanding why a person has trouble eating can help you to find the best ways to support them. As dementia progresses it can be normal for your loved one to eat less and lose weight. At this time the focus could change to eating for comfort and focusing less on amount of intake and their weight. Talk to your healthcare provider for support.

For more information on dementia go to:
Alzheimer.ca/ab

People with dementia can:

- **Have taste and smell changes.** The food they like can change over time. They may prefer sweet foods. Their appetite can increase or decrease as the disease progresses.
- **Forget what things are and what they are used for.** They may try to use a knife instead of a spoon to eat their soup. They may not remember what a food is when they see it on a menu or recognize the food in front of them.
- **Have a hard time making decisions.** This makes it hard to choose what food they want to eat, especially when there are many choices.
- **Lose the ability to feed themselves independently.** For example, they may lose hand eye coordination which can cause them to spill food, miss their mouth, or make cutting up food difficult.

- **Develop problems with chewing or swallowing.** Food and drink can end up in the airway and cause choking or pneumonia. Changing the texture of their food and having a proper feeding position may help this.
- **Have challenging mealtime behaviors.** Some examples are spitting, pocketing food in their cheek, throwing food, or turning their head away from food. They may wander away from the table during a meal or snack. These behaviors can upset family members and friends, but are common symptoms.



How to help people with dementia eat better

If you see your loved one is losing weight or eating poorly, contact their doctor or nurse. You can ask them to make a referral to a dietitian for a nutrition assessment. See the next page for some ways that family, friends, and caregivers can help people with dementia eat better and enjoy food.

Here are some tips that may help people with dementia eat better:

- Offer familiar foods the person likes. Dementia can cause food preferences to change, so the foods offered may need to change too. Share this information between family, friends, and caregivers.
- If the person is restless or has a poor appetite, small, frequent meals or snacks can be easier to eat.
- Don't rush mealtime. If the person with dementia is a slow eater, give them more time to eat.
- If your loved one's dementia is in the early stages, they may enjoy going out for a meal at their favorite restaurant or sharing a meal with family and friends.
- Your loved one may get confused with too many utensils or dishes at the table. Only have the dishes needed for the meal set at the table.
- Try offering one food and one beverage at a time.
- Reduce distractions during meals to help them focus on eating, for example turn off the TV.
- Make sure your loved one has regular dental checkups. Cavities, mouth sores, or poor fitting dentures can make eating difficult and painful.



- Finger foods can help with independent eating for people having difficulty with utensils. Some examples are:
 - Sandwiches
 - Hard boiled eggs
 - Cheese or meat slices
 - Cut-up fruit or vegetables
 - Muffins, toast, or waffles
- For people who are having a hard time eating enough, include higher energy foods such as:
 - 2%–3.25% milk
 - 2%–10% M.F. yogurt, or yogurt drinks
 - Eggs, cheese, or avocado
 - Muffins, scones, or toast with peanut butter or cheese
 - Hummus or guacamole
 - Desserts: pudding, cookies, cake, or ice cream
 - Nuts and dried fruit (if they can be chewed and swallowed safely)
 - Nutrition supplement drinks or shakes
- Some facilities have limits on the types of food they can provide. Family and friends can bring in food. Ask staff to offer these foods and remind the person to eat them.
- Remember to check or ask staff to check the fridge and cupboards regularly to remove any expired foods. People with dementia may not realize foods are expired.
- When you visit, offer fluids to help prevent dehydration.
- When you visit during meals, talk about the smell and taste of the foods. This helps them know what they are eating. If possible, join your loved one for the meal as eating together can be enjoyable.

For more information



- Talk to your healthcare team.
- Call Health Link at 811 and ask to talk to a dietitian or complete a [self-referral form](#) on [ahs.ca/811](#).
- Visit [ahs.ca/nutrition](#).

