

for nourishing someone **living with dementia**

by **Jane Clarke**

For the last 30 years, I have supported many people living with dementia, their families and carers, in my work as a dietician and Cordon Bleu foodie.

I also have personal experience of the eating, nutritional and emotional challenges this condition can bring, as my beautiful dad had fronto-temporal lobe dementia during the last decade of his life, which affected how, when and what he wanted to eat.

Dad's lunch had to be at one o'clock; there was no flexibility, otherwise his anxiety levels and confusion rose. The clock dictated our lives to an obsessive degree, but it was worth it for the comfort his routine provided him. My dad also needed to know before he started eating that there would be some pudding to follow, otherwise he would get upset and confused. Particularly in the last couple of years of his life, we noticed that my dad's sweet cravings were getting a lot stronger, which is so often the case with people living with this progressive disease.

Dementia can affect desire and ability to eat in so many ways and not everyone experiences the same challenges. But I suggest that you use these simple strategies to help you meet the challenges, such as how to prompt a poor appetite and develop calming mealtime routines, which I have found so useful for so many families over the last few decades.

This document provides general nutrition tips and tricks for individuals with dementia. It's important to recognise that every person's experience with dementia is unique, with varying symptoms and rates of progression. The information presented here should not be considered a one-size-fits-all approach, as each individual's needs may differ.

Let's talk

Dementia

Calming, consistent and familiar routines

A regular routine is reassuring for someone living with dementia – eating 10 minutes later, sitting at a different table, or with people or friends they don't usually sit at the table with, can easily throw them, so try to keep things familiar and consistent.

Making food the focus

Mealtimes can be time-consuming and challenging – but they can also be highlights of the day that nourish with sociability, fun, and something we could share together, as well as food. We certainly used to love eating with Dad and seeing the simple joy on his face as he enjoyed the puddings especially.

Try to slow down

We juggle so many tasks when caring for someone that it can be tempting to hurry meals, which only increases the likelihood of upset and for very little food to get eaten.

Minimise distractions

While the person you're looking after is focusing on swallowing or getting the food from fork to mouth, it helps not to have the radio or the TV on to distract them.

Take a timeout

If a meal is becoming challenging, it can help to step back for a minute and give both you and the person you are caring for a chance to calm down and regroup.

Take off the pressure

If they're getting frustrated at not being able to eat when the sole focus is on doing so, sitting in front of the TV with a plate of something easy to nibble, such as sandwiches or cut-up soft fruits, could mean they eat while being distracted by the programme. So experiment with both scenarios.

Wait for a better time

If they're drowsy and disinterested, feeding can cause choking – so try to leave a bit of time before you try again. And do seek medical advice if they're overly drowsy, as it could be that a change in some of the medication they're taking could give you a better window of opportunity for helping them to eat.

Managing changes

As dementia progresses it's highly likely that appetite and ability to eat will change. These shifts are not always down to the disease itself – sometimes medication can put them off food, causing weight loss. Or a new medicine may interfere with hunger messages in the brain, so they don't register feeling full and stop eating. They may likely also forget that they have eaten and say they want more food when they don't physically need it. Or they may crave sweet foods. Weight gain may cause physical challenges and additional health risks, so while occasional treats are fine, try to keep to the basic structure of an overall nourishing well-balanced diet.

Create a food mood board

Often, memories are linked to foods we loved eating at a precise moment. A personal food mood board made out of photos of favourite dishes, people and places can be a great way to communicate and also stimulate a jaded appetite and it can be a lovely 'memory activity' for everyone living with dementia.

Swallowing difficulties

Physical skills like keeping our mouths closed while food is inside to help us chew and swallow, can become difficult when living with dementia. As dementia develops the brain may be unable to activate the body's natural swallowing reflex (known as dysphagia), which can cause choking. A lack of saliva can also mean that it's more difficult to chew and swallow food. If you are caring for someone, look out for signs of swallowing issues, such as coughing or grimacing when eating, spitting out, or keeping it in the mouth for longer than usual. A few simple tweaks can really help.

Find alternatives to liquidised meals

Rather than simply always pureeing meals, which can make a person feel disempowered and dispirited, try to find 'softer by coincidence' alternatives. Try a cheese soufflé, a delicious, simple chicken soup with a celeriac and potato purée served in a ramekin alongside, or an appetising shepherd's pie served in a small ramekin instead of struggling with the classic Sunday roast.

Serve a pâté or savoury mousse, with a soft crumpet instead of toast to make a great lunch. Labneh cheese is wonderful and easy to swallow.

Make wonderful mashed potatoes, with a finely grated mature cheddar or parmesan, or some crème fraîche and very finely chopped herbs such as dill or parsley, to make them that bit tastier and more likely to titillate jaded taste buds.



Find naturally soft to eat and easy to swallow puddings such as panna cotta, lemon pudding and trifle (which is delicious when made with either classic berries or something like stewed quince or pear). When choosing cakes, consider options like a lemon drizzle, a moist ginger cake or chocolate brownies, instead of a flapjack or a rich fruit cake, which often contains nuts and more challenging ingredients to swallow.

Use smaller utensils (for example, cake forks and knives) to encourage smaller mouthfuls.

Thicken liquids as some people find thin fluids trickier to swallow. This may seem counterintuitive, but as dysphagia progresses, thicker consistencies can actually be much easier to swallow than thin liquids. This is because thickened liquids move more slowly and cohesively, making it easier to control the swallowing process and prevent aspiration (inhaling liquid into the lungs). In contrast, thin liquids can be more difficult to manage and are more likely to cause coughing or choking. In which case, soups, milk with melted chocolate in, to thicken and provide a good flavour, or a smoothie given body with ingredients like avocado, ground nuts, banana or a dollop of nut butter can be a good way to ensure they have enough fluids. Italian-style soups which have soaked bread in them, such as ribollita, can be gorgeous and much easier to swallow than a thin consommé. If you have a thinner soup and want to thicken it, then adding some mashed potato, cream or Greek-style yoghurt is another idea.

Don't be afraid of using spices and more intense flavours such as garlic, a little chilli, fresh ginger, cardamom, even a little wine (if allowed) in sauces. They not only stimulate the taste buds, but also activate the brain's response to initiate the swallow reflex and encourage swallowing. You can, for instance, stew fruits such as apricots with cardamom and a little orange juice – not only delicious from the spice, but also because stewing the fruit (and the same applies to other soft stone fruits like peaches, plums, nectarines, greengages, etc) intensifies the flavours.

Present dishes such as purées with love and care

Instead of a plate with dollops on, ramekins or even a soup served in a little espresso cup can feel and look far more appetising. Remember, we eat with our eyes so the way food looks has an enormous impact on how tempted we feel to eat.



For more recipe ideas to nourish your loved ones, visit the nutrition section under our partners on the Let's talk Dementia website.