

Australian version

iSupport For Dementia

Training and support manual
for carers of people with dementia



Unit 2. Eating, drinking and preventing health problems

Why is this unit important?

Dementia can affect eating and drinking in various ways depending on the individual, the stage of dementia and other health conditions which in turn can lead to poor nutrition. Poor nutrition can lead to other health problems.

How will this unit help me?

By learning how to encourage good nutrition, prevent weight loss, promote drinking and eating safely can prevent health problems caused by poor nutrition.

What will I learn?

- How to modify food, drinks and eating patterns for the person to improve nutrition and prevent weight loss.
- How to help the person to eat safely and prevent choking.

Improving nutrition and preventing weight loss

In the late stages of dementia, a person with dementia may experience chewing and swallowing problems. In addition, reduced abilities to smell, taste and see can all cause the person with dementia to have problems eating and drinking and can have a negative impact on health. Depression and changes of sleep patterns may also impair appetite.

Dot is not awake during normal mealtimes

Dot has been living with dementia for 9 years and is cared for by her daughter, Anne. Recently, Anne notices that her mother sleeps during the day and is very difficult to wake and assist with her meals during the normal mealtimes. Anne believes that her mother is not hungry and does not want to disturb her sleeping. A recent check-up showed that Dot had lost 2.5 kg since the last check-up 5 weeks ago (5% of her body weight).



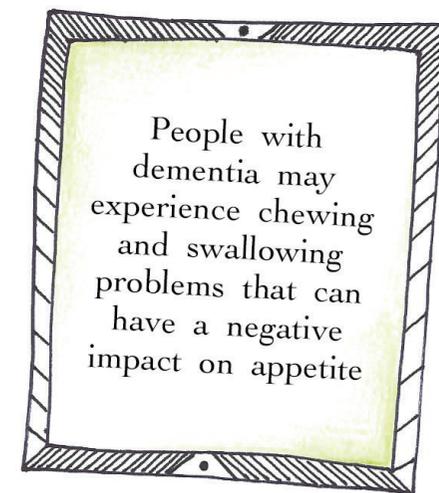
Check your understanding *Your advice for Anne***What would you advise Anne to do to improve Dot's eating?**

Pick all the answers you think are appropriate.

- Be flexible to have meals when her mother is awake.
- In a diary, keep a record of what and how often her mother eats.
- Ensure Dot has access to foods she enjoys eating.
- Have nutritious finger foods and drinks available for Dot to snack on when she is awake.
- Discuss with your doctor the need for food supplements between meals to add calories.

Check your understanding 

All answers are right.



If the person is unable to chew normal food due to the loss of teeth, chop vegetables into small pieces, use minced meat to make dishes for them or provide soft food such as noodles, pasta, mashed potatoes, rice cakes etc. Use nutritious drinks such as milkshakes.

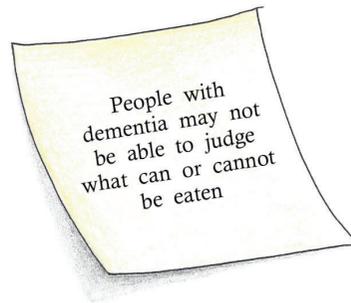
Staying hydrated is very important. Encourage fluids by offering small cups of water or other liquids throughout the day or foods with high water content, such as fruit, soups, milkshakes and smoothies.

Tips

Ensuring safe eating and drinking

People with dementia may experience the following problems:

- 1) People with dementia may not be able to judge what can or cannot be eaten. People may eat inedible materials in front of them when they feel hungry. You need to keep inedible materials and chemicals in safe places.
- 2) If the person is in the late stages of dementia, they may experience swallowing difficulties that can cause choking and may lead to aspiration pneumonia. Aspiration pneumonia is caused when food or liquid is breathed in and goes down the windpipe rather than the food pipe. Although generally rare, aspiration pneumonia is, unfortunately, more common in people with dementia. Eating, drinking and feeding methods may need to be modified to prevent this life-threatening problem. The pages that follow will provide examples of each type of problem.



Inedible materials

Oliver has been living with dementia for 10 years and is cared for by his wife, Ella. Recently, Ella notices that the soaps she put in the kitchen and bathroom have disappeared. She also notices that her husband is eating the flowers she puts on the dining table. She has seen Oliver go to the kitchen and mistakenly pick up a soy sauce bottle and a bottle of dishwashing detergent to drink.

Check your understanding



Inedible materials

What do you think Ella should do?

- Recognise that she needs to lock household chemicals, such as dishwashing detergent, in a cabinet.
- Remove all non-edible items from the dinner table.
- Leave some inedible household materials in the places Oliver is able to reach, because she thinks Oliver should be taught that those cannot be eaten.

Check your understanding

*Inedible materials*

- ✓ **Recognise that she needs to lock household chemicals, such as dishwashing detergent, in a cabinet.**
This is a good response. People with dementia may get confused about what to eat. Remembering that this is not their choice and making some simple changes to the eating environment can help. Keeping dangerous things away will help protect the person with dementia.
- ✓ **Remove all non-edible items from the dinner table.**
Correct! This is a good response. This focuses attention on the food provided, rather than other non-food items. Having too many things on the table can be confusing for the person with dementia and takes the focus off of food. Try to get the person with dementia to focus attention on the food provided, rather than other non-food items.
- ✗ **Leave some inedible household materials in the places Oliver is able to reach, because she thinks Oliver should be taught that those cannot be eaten.**
This could be dangerous for the person with dementia. Remembering that this is not their choice and making some simple changes to the environment can help. Keeping dangerous things away will help protect the person with dementia.

Helping a person to eat safely

Di has been living with dementia for 10 years and is bedridden. Her husband, Joe, and his two adult daughters help her to eat safely. Recently, they found Di has difficulty swallowing the soft food that they have made for her. They also notice that Di coughs when she drinks something. She seems to have a high temperature and after the family seek medical help Di is admitted to the hospital.

Di is diagnosed with aspiration pneumonia and after treatment in the hospital, Di has recovered enough to go home. The doctor orders a healthy, soft diet and thickened drinks for Di to consume at home to prevent future aspiration pneumonia.

Check your understanding

*Helping a person to eat safely***How can Joe and his two daughters help Di?**

- Learn how to make healthy, soft food and thickened drinks for Di.
- Let Di eat and drink while she is lying in bed.

Check your understanding

*Helping a person to eat safely*

- ✓ **Learn how to make healthy, soft food and thickened drinks for Di.**
Providing a healthy diet of soft food and thickened drinks will make it easier for people in the late stage of dementia to continue to eat and drink and maintain a healthy weight.
- ✗ **Let Di eat and drink while she is lying in bed.**
They should sit Di in an upright position which will help her eat and drink better and prevent food from going down her windpipe which could lead to aspiration pneumonia.

A healthy soft diet can be made by finely chopping and mashing food or using an electric blender. Thickened fluids can be made by adding a paste of cornflour and water to liquid while heating and stirring until it thickens. Note: Commercial stir-in thickeners are available in many supermarkets in Australia.

If you need assistance with the level of fluid and food texture modification required, contact a Speech Pathologist available through your local doctor or hospital.

Tips

Let's review what you have learned

- You can modify eating patterns for the person to improve nutrition.
- You can modify food to improve eating for the person.
- You can help the person to eat and drink safely by keeping inedible materials and household chemicals in a safe place.
- You can help to prevent choking and aspiration pneumonia by modifying food and drinks and by positioning the person in an upright position when helping the person to eat.



Additional Information

Carer Gateway is a national online and phone service that provides practical information and resources to support carers. The interactive service finder helps carers connect to local support services. Free call 1800 422 737 Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm.

National Dementia Helpline www.dementia.org.au/search/node/eating

You can call the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500 for information. They can also tell you about National Dementia Awareness Month held in September each year or about conferences and seminars on the subject of dementia. The National Dementia Helpline can also put you in touch with support groups around the country for carers of people with dementia. The groups let you share experiences, learn from others and discuss issues and emotions in a safe environment.

Carer support groups can offer you a safe place to talk about your role as a carer. They can put you in touch with other carers who may be experiencing similar things to you so you can share advice and suggestions to support each other.

My Aged care website - www.myagedcare.gov.au/caring-someone-particular-need/caring-someone-dementia

Phone 1800 200 422 Mon - Fri 8am - 8pm Sat 10am - 2 pm.

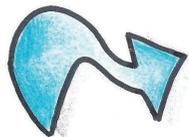


RELATED LEARNING UNITS

- Module 1 Unit 4 How to respond to repetitive behaviour
- Module 4 Unit 1 Eating and drinking - more pleasant mealtimes

You finished this learning unit, well done!

Would you like to try the following relaxation exercise?



Meditation

This exercise will help you feel calm and reduces stress. You will breathe with your stomach according to a rhythm.

This is how you do it:

- Sit straight on a chair and make sure your face and shoulders are relaxed.
- Bring your hands to your stomach and breathe into your belly.
- Breathe in for 4 counts and breathe out for 8 counts at a comfortable pace.
- Your stomach should expand with each inhale, and it contracts with each exhale.
- Return to your normal breathing and spend one minute just watching your breath and noticing how you feel.
- Practice listening without negative judgement.
- If your mind wanders, refocus on breathing and meditation.



You finished this unit, well done!