



### ***Why do older people with dementia need to eat well?***

*The purpose of a good diet is that someone receives the right amount of energy and nutrients they need to maintain bodily processes and protect against ill health. There is plenty of evidence to support the fact that a poor diet will increase the chances of illness and many other health conditions as well as lowering someone's quality of life. Eating a wide variety of foods regularly will ensure someone's dietary needs are met although in the case of dementia there are often many challenges that must be overcome to achieve this.*

### ***How the ageing body changes***

*Ageing can render the immune system less efficient, which makes older people with dementia more vulnerable to illness and infection. A slower digestive system makes constipation more common and a loss of muscle and bone strength increases the risk of falls and fractures. Understanding thirst can also occur as less efficient kidneys make urine less concentrated and this can make dehydration more common.*

### ***Why are older people more likely to become malnourished?***

*A good diet is important for everyone but even more so for people with dementia who are at greater risk of becoming malnourished. Not eating an adequate diet can lead to someone becoming under-nourished and this will impact on the greater chance of getting ill, skin problems, muscle weakness, tiredness, confusion and irritability. There are many reasons why this may be more common in older people with dementia:*

- *Smaller appetites and eating too little food*
- *Chronic disease*
- *Increased need for energy and nutrients due to illness or wound healing*
- *Chewing and swallowing problems impact on food choices*
- *Medicines may contribute to change in appetite, abnormal eating or eating disorders*
- *Changes to the senses of sight, hearing, taste and smell make meals less enjoyable*
- *Reduced communication skills make it difficult to explain your food preferences or that the temperature of your food is too hot or cold or that you may still be hungry*

### ***Informal dementia carers in the UK***

*There are currently 700K informal carers for the 850K people living with dementia in the UK. Looking after someone with dementia is challenging and often impacts on family relationships and physical and psychological health but at the same time it can be rewarding and strengthen*

*family bonds through the intimate relationship. Caring for someone at home can allow loved ones to catch glimpses of past personality such as the occasional smile, laugh or a few words that allow an emotional connection to stay alive and that may be missed in residential care.*

*Whether you're a sibling, child or family friend, the effects of possible sleep deprivation and carrying out all the household chores, extra cleaning and laundry as well as moving and lifting their loved one can be exhausting and this is even more relevant as 44% of carers have a long-standing illness or disability according to research carried out by NHS digital.*

*Providing adequate food can be a challenge for home carers. Budget constraints, lack of food knowledge or cooking skills, managing difficult eating behaviours and exhaustion means that cooking home-prepared meals from scratch three times a day is often not a reality. Understanding how to make mealtimes more manageable and quick healthy food fixes can lessen the burden whilst keeping your loved ones with dementia healthy.*

### ***A few tips to help people with dementia to eat well***

*Dementia is a fluid condition and every case is different but I hope these tips can offer a little insight and advice to help manage mealtimes.*

#### ***Stimulate the appetite!***

*If you're struggling to get someone to eat then try whetting their appetite. Any increase in activity can help instigate hunger so a short walk or chair-based activity may help (this also helps with digestion). Don't fill stomachs with excess fluids before mealtimes as this will blunt the appetite. Prepare very flavoursome meals by adding spices or strong flavoured foods such as mature cheese, mustard or tomato puree. Food should also look appealing and eye-catching with bright colours as we often, 'eat with our eyes'.*

*Try and use simple food cues to help older people with dementia orientate themselves with mealtimes. The smell of toast or coffee in the morning, the clanking of pans or sight of someone cooking may all help someone with dementia to understand that it's time to eat.*

*Mealtimes can be flexible and it may be easier to focus on the times of the day when someone usually has a bigger appetite, whether this is at breakfast, lunch or evening meal. You should also offer small portions of food if someone has a small appetite as too much can be off-putting.*

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### *Create a calm eating environment*

- *Avoid noise from the television or radio at mealtimes*
- *Make sure plates are clearly visible on the table opting for red or blue colours or ones with a coloured ring around the edge (you could also try a white plate with coloured placemat)*
- *Don't clutter the table as this can be very distracting*
- *Allow plenty of time to eat*
- *Eat together*

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### *Take account of food preferences*

*Understanding someone's food likes and dislikes can make a difference at mealtimes. Be adventurous with new flavours but not to the point that someone refuses food. Think about food occasions that the person your caring for may have been familiar with as it may even trigger a memory and connection with that particular food. A Sunday roast, Christmas dinner, Strawberries during Wimbledon, seasonal foods, Birthday cake or hot cross buns at Easter are all good examples.*

*Taste and smell diminishes with age and more so with dementia so food preferences may change day-by-day. It's not uncommon for people with dementia to prefer sweet foods so try adding a little honey to savoury quiches, pies and omelettes or serve main meals with apple or cranberry sauce. Fruit chutneys are also great to serve with cheese or cold meats, which also work as finger foods. You can also add honey to roast vegetables and apples or dried fruit work well in stews, casseroles, curries and other one-pot dishes that can be cooked in batches and frozen.*

*Be aware that someone may not remember when they last ate and this may cause reluctance to meals. Listen to what they are saying and try and work around this with the food you offer. For example, if the person you're caring for keeps asking about breakfast then you could consider several breakfasts across that day to encourage them to eat.*

### *Maintain independence*

*It's important that someone with dementia is given the opportunity to feed themselves as this helps retain a sense of independence and dignity. Don't worry about neatness as it's more important that someone is eating independently. This may mean being patient and mealtimes could be*

lengthy and involve gentle encouragement along the way as well as appropriate supervision to reduce any risks of choking.

As dementia progresses someone may become less dexterous and lose the ability to use cutlery. You can find specially adapted cutlery, cups with handles and non-slip placemats to make things easier. If cutlery becomes difficult to use then provide finger foods. A finger food diet can be just as nutritious and served hot or cold. Pizza slices, chopped vegetables, fruit, meat pies, boiled eggs, potato wedges, sandwiches, fruit loaf are all good examples.

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### **Recognising weight loss**

*There are many reasons why someone with dementia may lose their appetite such as suffering with constipation, swallowing issues, depression, mouth ulcers or painful teeth. It's important to be aware of weight loss in people with dementia and act immediately to help regain a healthy appetite and reduce the risk of malnutrition.*

- *Bones visible under the skin*
- *Loose clothing*
- *Loose rings*
- *Loose fitting dentures*
- *Leaving food on the plate*

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### **Fortify foods**

*If someone is losing weight then you may need to consider fortifying foods as it's important to get as much nutrition as possible into a small serving of food, especially calories and protein. Full fat milk, cream, cheese, oils, butter, mayonnaise, crème fraiche, milk powder, coconut milk, avocado, nut butters and pureed tofu are a few ideas of foods you can use.*

*Nourishing smoothies can also help to top up someone's calorie and protein intake. There's no end to the different combinations you can use and the best base is full fat milk.*

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## *Planning meals*

*When you're trying to think about what food to prepare each day it's worth paying thought to a few factors that may make mealtimes more enjoyable for people with dementia.*

- Combine colours on the plate to help meals become more visible. Choosing three or four is a good target such as steamed fish with carrots and peas*
- Combine textures to make food more appealing. Mix up crisp, crunchy, chewy, soft and smooth foods (unless someone is having difficulty swallowing)*
- Vary taste but don't add too many favours to any one meal*
- Have a buffet day with finger foods such as quiche, scotch eggs, vegetable sticks, cocktail sausages and yoghurts*

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## *Quick fixes*

*If you don't have the time to prepare something from scratch or are just too exhausted then there is nothing wrong with turning to good quality ready meals as a quick option. Dishes such as lasagna, cottage pie, fish pie, macaroni cheese and risotto all provide a good soft food option. Canned foods can also save time and offer a quick nourishing meal. Canned fruit, fish (watch out for bones that pose a choking risk) or even baked beans are good examples and can be partnered with other ingredients. Eggs are also a quick food option and can be scrambled with soft vegetables such as tomatoes and mushrooms or made into a simple omelette.*

*Pre-prepared foods can also be used to make an interesting buffet meal that is also suitable for people that require a finger food diet. You can also cook foods in batches and keep individual portions in the freezer to help save time.*

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## *Food textures*

*Some older people with dementia may need the texture of their food altered.*

- Difficulty using cutlery or with a tremor may need finger foods*
- Difficulty chewing and poor teeth may need softer foods (mash, tender meats and fish, soft vegetables)*

- *Difficulty swallowing may require a pureed diet (you must seek professional advice to assess someone's potential swallowing problem before pureeing their diet)*



## *Hydration*

*Dehydration is common among older people with dementia as they may not recognise they are thirsty, may forget to drink, may be unable to communicate that they are thirsty, or may refuse to drink because they are worried about incontinence.*

*Dehydration can cause headaches, confusion, irritability and constipation which can contribute to urinary tract infections. Older people who are incontinent need to drink more, not less, to encourage the bladder to empty regularly to prevent infection and to exercise the bladder muscles.*

*We get some of our fluids from food, particularly foods such as soup, stews, fruits and vegetables, jelly, sauces, ice Lollis and yoghurt. All drinks help us to remain hydrated, including tea, coffee, water, milk, fruit teas and fruit juices.*

*Caring for someone with dementia is a full-time job and mealtimes present a whole new set of challenges however, maintaining a well-nourished body will help someone with dementia achieve a better quality of life and help to deter the onset of other illnesses that may make caring for them even more challenging.*