

Tips for Carers

Preparing Food and Improving the Eating Environment

Contact dietitian: Telephone no:

Trying to improve the environment in which a person eats can make a significant difference to how much they might eat. This could mean anything from changing the way we lay the table to using voice prompts to encourage the person to eat or drink.

Preparing food

- Keep it simple – meals can still be nutritious without being complicated.
- Offer support with planning meals, making choices and remembering when to eat.
- Preparing food in advance and freezing it in portions can reduce cooking time. Alternatively, using frozen or convenience food can still be part of a healthy balanced diet and is useful if you are short of time.
- Ensure that food is easily visible otherwise it may be forgotten and not eaten.
- Make sure that the person can access food easily and remove wrappers, open packets and cut up food into manageable-sized pieces.
- Present food on the plate attractively.
- Serve one food at a time and in a relaxed and unhurried manner to avoid confusion.
- Check that the temperature of the food is appropriate.

In terms of safety, some carers may worry about the dangers of people using certain kitchen appliances, or eating food that is past its use by date. You can check food cupboards and fridges regularly and throw away unsafe food to help prevent this. Considering changing a gas cooker to electric may be advisable. Microwaves can avoid the risk of

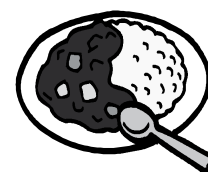
hobs and ovens being left switched on. Some people, with dementia for example, may eat non-food items without realising, such as pet food. If this is a risk keep these items out of reach.

Laying the table

- Try to make food easily visible by having contrasting colours such as coloured food on white plates or light-coloured food on dark-coloured plates.
- Place food and drink within easy reach.
- For somebody with dementia, vivid prints or patterns on tableware can become a distraction, and this may mean they do not eat well. Therefore choose plain table cloths, place mats and crockery.
- Encourage reminiscence in terms of favourite foods or try old-style crockery.

The eating environment

- Serve food in a relaxed and unhurried manner.
- Encourage the person to sit at a laid table rather than offering food to them in the chair they haven't moved from.
- Try to encourage correct positioning before eating – ensure their back is supported, they are sitting back in the chair with their knees at 90 degrees and their feet flat on the ground, and the chair is a comfortable distance from the table. For people in wheelchairs, make sure their head is central and well supported, and they are sitting as upright as possible.



- Minimise other distractions, for example turn off the TV.
- Ensure good lighting, avoiding glare and shade.
- Ask whether the person prefers to eat alone or in company and try to accommodate this where possible, as it can have a big impact on how much somebody is likely to eat.
- Sitting with and observing others eating can act as a cue or prompt to eat.
- A radio may be comforting for people if they eat alone.
- Day centres or luncheon clubs can provide a good environment for mealtimes.
- If eating out with friends, explain to staff and other diners what physical or mental difficulties the person has, as this will help them to understand any unusual behaviour.
- Give the person time to eat, and provide alternative places to eat if they become agitated at the dinner table.
- If the person tends to wander and will not sit down long enough to eat, offer finger foods 'on the go' (see fact sheet).
- If a meal is rejected initially or the person says they are not hungry, do not force the issue, instead offer it again later or provide a nourishing snack in its place.
- Ensure regular dental care so that gums and teeth are healthy and dentures fit well. Poor dental health can affect a person's ability to chew certain foods, cause toothache and discomfort when eating. However, some people may be unable to communicate that they are in pain and just refuse food instead.

Maintaining independence

- A person with dementia may eat and drink better if there are environmental cues which remind them that this is a time to eat and drink, such as sounds and smells associated with food and drink.
- Ensure cutlery is boldly coloured as this makes it easier to see.
- Special cutlery may be used for those who have difficulty holding or using cutlery. A spoon is often easier to coordinate than a knife and fork. Advice can be obtained about adapted cutlery from an occupational therapist to assist with self-feeding if this is an issue. Examples might be adapted lightweight cutlery, non-slip place mats, plate guards or beaker-style cups with two handles to allow a steadier grip.
- Try placing cutlery into hands or use a hand-over-hand approach to encourage the person to eat.
- Help to cut up food into manageable-sized pieces.
- If a client cannot coordinate cutlery then serve a variety of finger foods (see fact sheet).
- Prompt the person to eat or drink by encouraging them using sayings such as 'take a bite' or 'have a sip of drink.'

If you are still concerned about someone's appetite and/or they have experienced some unplanned weight loss, please speak with their GP or dietitian.

