

Making the Most of Mealtime

Eating and food are at the center of many of life's occasions, celebrations, and experiences. We often schedule events around the intent to eat. We include food in social gatherings, and most importantly, we rely on nutrition and hydration to survive. Throughout life we develop preferences, food likes/dislikes, habits, and we form routines around mealtimes and eating.



So, how does dementia affect eating?

As dementia progresses, mealtimes can become challenging for all involved.

- Often, caregivers report, “my mom won’t eat much anymore”, or “my wife used to cook, but it’s too difficult for her now”, and even, “my husband chews his food, but won’t swallow it”.
- An individual who cooked dinner every night for a family of five may now have difficulty planning meals and following recipes.
- Using equipment in the kitchen may become dangerous if an individual with dementia forgets to turn off the stove.
- Food preferences may change, and sensations and perceptions of food textures may change as well.
- In the later stages of dementia, individuals can develop difficulty feeding themselves, and chewing and swallowing food and liquids.

How can we maximize mealtime, and decrease frustrations? Finding strategies for your loved one is the most important – there is not a one size fits all when it comes to eating!

So, how can I maximize my loved one’s mealtime?

As dementia progresses, individuals may lose the ability to identify certain foods, textures, liquids, and their preferences. Weight loss and dehydration can become a concern, and they may become more dependent on caregivers to assist with meal preparation and delivery.

Let’s get ready to eat!



Assessing mealtime safety is important before implementing additional strategies. As dementia progresses, physical changes can occur, making safety with eating a concern. Use this guide to assess your loved one’s mealtime environment:



The Basics

- **Dentures:** Dentures should fit well to hold them in place. If they are not as well fitting as they had been in the past, be sure to use an adhesive to keep them in place. Weight loss can change the way dentures fit, so scheduling routine visits to the dentist can help
- **Glasses:** If the person has glasses, ensure that they are present at mealtimes. Individuals often have difficulty understanding what they see, so making sure they can see what is in front of them and that there is adequate light will support their recognition of what is in front of them.
- **Hearing Aids:** These small devices can make a world of difference in communicating with an individual at mealtimes. This may be just for mealtime socialization; but in many cases it is critical to give occasional reminders to slow down or take smaller bites. A hearing aid can help the person have success and safety with intake.
- **Environment:** Take a look at the table and the area the person is eating in.
 - **Reduce Distractions:** Many people with dementia have difficulty maintaining attention, so moving them away from a busy location or window may help them to pay better attention to the meal. Consider removing items from the table to increase attention to eating.
 - **Routine:** Set up a simple mealtime routine to “prepare” the person that the time to eat is coming up. That may be the scent of the food, table setting, and hand washing. Putting a simple routine in place helps the person understand that it’s nearing the time to eat.
 - **Lighting:** Make sure the area where the person eats has adequate light. As people age, they require additional light in order to see at their best. When a person has dementia, this becomes even more important, and they need extra light to better understand their environment and the task they need to accomplish.
 - **Contrast:** People who have dementia do better when there is color contrast in the foods they eat and the items they use. Look at the place at the table where the person eats. Make sure that the person can distinguish the plate or cup from the placemat or table and also consider the food items on the plate.

