

Making the Most of Mealtime

Eating is a core part of daily life, celebrations, and routines. Dementia can make mealtimes challenging, but with the right approach, caregivers can create supportive environments that enhance nutrition, dignity, and enjoyment.

How Dementia Affects Eating

As dementia progresses, individuals may experience:

- **Decreased appetite:** Caregivers may notice their loved ones eating less, refusing food, or showing disinterest in meals.
- **Difficulty planning and preparing meals:** A once-capable cook may struggle with recipes, meal planning, and safely using kitchen equipment.
- **Changes in food preferences and perception:** Taste and texture preferences may shift, and familiar foods may suddenly seem unpleasant.
- **Chewing and swallowing challenges:** In later stages, individuals may forget how to chew, hold food in their mouths without swallowing, or require assistance during meals.

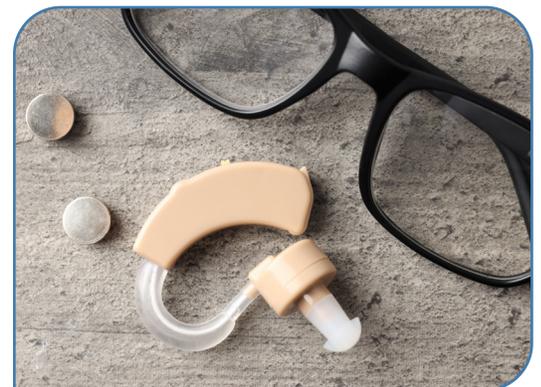


Maximizing Mealtime Success

There is no “one size fits all” solution — personalized strategies are key. Prior to making adjustments, assess mealtime safety to ensure a comfortable and effective dining experience.

Mealtime Safety Checklist

- ✓ **Dentures:** Ensure dentures fit well to prevent discomfort. Weight loss can change the way they fit, so regular dental visits are important. If slipping occurs, use adhesive for stability.
- ✓ **Glasses:** Ensure glasses are worn during meals. Good visibility helps individuals recognize food and better understand their environment.
- ✓ **Hearing Aids:** These assist with mealtime socialization and enable caregivers to offer helpful reminders, such as slowing down or taking smaller bites.



Optimizing the Environment

- ✓ **Reduce Distractions:** Many individuals with dementia struggle to focus. Minimize clutter, unnecessary objects, and external noise to improve attention. When dining out, choose or request a table away from high traffic flow and noise.

- ✓ **Routine Matters:** Establish a mealtime routine — this could include washing hands, setting the table, or enjoying the aroma of food. Predictability helps with comprehension.
- ✓ **Lighting Adjustments:** Aging and dementia increase the need for bright lighting to enhance food recognition and engagement.
- ✓ **Contrast Aids Recognition:** Choose tableware that contrasts with the placemat or table to help distinguish dishes and utensils.

Encouraging Dignified Dining

Dignified dining is key element of mealtime. When we are having a meal or snack or even a cocktail, we are most likely in the presence of other people. And when we are with others, we all have the right to be dignified. This may look different for each person, but it’s about an environment that is clean and tidy, eating/drinking where a person is comfortable, wearing clothing that makes a person feel good, and having others recognize this need.



How to Foster Dignity in Mealtimes

- **Assist with setting up and cleaning up as needed.** Rather than using bibs (which may feel infantilizing), opt for discreet clothing protectors or “dining shirts” that preserve self-respect while preventing stains. Help the individual wash their hands before and after meals as needed.
- **Be Attentive:** Make eye contact, engage in conversation, and ensure the meal is a positive experience.
- **Create a Comfortable Atmosphere:** Minimize distractions while adding pleasant touches, like soft, familiar music. Choose well-supported seating.
- **Support Independence:** Allow individuals to attempt eating on their own first. Assist only as needed by pre-loading utensils or cutting food into manageable pieces.
- **Avoid Rushing:** Allowing time for an individual to enjoy the food they are eating is important. If they can feed themselves, make sure they are eating slowly, chewing thoroughly and that bite sizes are moderate. If the person needs assistance or needs to be fed, be sure that the mouth is empty and the person has swallowed before providing the next sip or bite. If you notice frequent coughing or choking, consult a Speech-Language Pathologist.
- **Offer Choices:** Instead of overwhelming decisions, simplify options: “Would you like a turkey sandwich or a ham sandwich?” If verbal selection is difficult, use pictures or real food items. When dining out, point to pictures on the menu.
- **Encourage Self-Service:** Independence promotes dignity. When the person can order from a menu, pour his/her own drinks, and scoop food onto the plate, it promotes self-confidence and a feeling of control. If there is a need for assistance, ask the person if s/he’d like some help, but always encourage the person to try first. Discretely ensure served food and drink are at safe temperatures.
- **Respect Preferences:** Ask if they’d like assistance before stepping in, and ensure they feel empowered in their choices.



By making thoughtful adaptations, caregivers can help individuals with dementia maintain dignity, comfort, and nutritional well-being throughout mealtimes.