

Enticing your loved one's taste buds

Did you know that people's eating habits may change as they move through their dementia journey and the disease progresses? These changes are in addition to those experienced by many older adults, as taste tends to diminish as we age.

You may have already noticed a difference in your loved one's food preferences. Because people with dementia don't experience flavor the way they once did, they often change their eating habits and adopt entirely new food preferences. For example, they may crave "heavy" foods, like cream, or highly flavored foods, such as sweets.

For a caregiver, packing enough nutrients into a loved one's meals can be a challenge, but there are ways to do it.

Tips for encouraging nutrition

Add protein. Identify good sources of protein that your loved one will eat or drink. Be aware that older adults may have more difficulty chewing meat, especially if they have dentures.

- Consider making a smoothie or milkshake and adding some extra protein powder.
- Supplement other food items, like oatmeal, desserts, and mashed potatoes, with protein. This usually won't change the food's flavor or texture.
- Try offering custard (made with eggs), pudding (made with milk), or liquid supplements.

Sneak in vegetables. Encouraging your loved one to eat vegetables can be a challenge. It's also important for people with dementia to take vitamin and mineral supplements, but visit with your doctor before starting.

- Change the texture of the vegetables or add a dipping sauce to help enhance the flavor.
- Puree vegetables and add them to a smoothie.
- Try adding flavored powdered vegetable supplements to shakes or smoothies. There are several varieties available.

Make eating a social event. We all, including your loved one, like to eat with others.

- Eat a healthy meal with your loved one. People with dementia tend to watch other people and mirror their actions.

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- Avoid distractions. This allows your loved one to focus on the food. For example, eating in busy restaurants may be too stimulating. Instead, consider going to restaurants when they are less crowded, noisy, and overwhelming.
- Depending on where the person is in the disease process, having a conversation while eating may or may not be possible. Early in the disease process, people may be able to multi-task easily. As the disease progresses, talking can actually distract them from eating altogether.

It depends on the stage. If your loved one is in the early disease process, you may have to pay particular attention to dietary restrictions associated with other medical issues to make sure he/she is getting proper nutrition. Inadequate nutrition can lead to other health issues such as weight gain/loss, falls, skin breakdown, etc. When people are in the end stage of the disease process, it's usually reasonable to let them eat whatever they want.

Changing tastes can be a challenge for you and your loved one, but focusing on making meals special times you enjoy with your loved one can make eating more enjoyable for all—and more nutritious for your loved one.



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