

Guide for Providing Comfortable Feeding in Advanced Dementia

When a person with advanced dementia loses interest in food it can be distressing for caregivers. After all, food is an expression of love and care, as well as fuel for the body.

It can help to know that dementia is a disease of the whole body, not only affecting memory and thinking, but causing swallowing problems, changes in digestion, muscle wasting and weight loss. People with dementia often lose interest in food even when they can still swallow.

To help you feel confident as a caregiver, we've described what feeding looks like in advanced dementia and have listed some ways, other than feeding, to express love and care.

As someone with dementia loses interest in eating, *the main focus of mealtime shifts from nutrition to socializing and enjoyment.* You can offer personal connection through touch, eye contact and conversation during meals.

Interest in eating will come and go, so we encourage you to offer food and fluids at intervals throughout the day even if they were refused earlier. Changing what is offered is helpful too, trying to focus on what is enjoyed. *Enjoyment will be shown with alertness, eagerness, eye contact, smiles and readily opening the mouth.*

If a person shows signs of disinterest or distress during feeding, they are not comfortable. You should slow down, pause, or stop feeding until the next meal or snack time. Feeding more slowly may be needed for swallowing safety and to give the person time to express preferences.

It is reasonable to limit the amount of time of each meal, perhaps to 30 minutes or an hour. Gentle encouragement to eat is okay. Verbally or physically pressuring a person to eat is not a good idea, since it doesn't respect their *current preference* about eating.

Remember you are not alone in this. Ask your hospice team about any caregiving questions. We are here to help.

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Feeding practices that focus on comfort, enjoyment, dignity and human connection include the following:

- Try past favorite foods, but realize tastes may change
- Finger foods may be enjoyed more than spoon feeding
- Eat in the room the person most enjoys
- Try special dishware to add beauty to meals
- Make eye contact and conversation while feeding
- Allow meals to be skipped when there is no interest
- Small bites, softer foods and going slowly is safer for swallowing
- Pause or stop feeding when signs of disinterest or distress are seen. These signs include turning the head away, closing the mouth, avoiding eye contact, closed eyes, furrowed brow or frown, falling asleep, not swallowing, choking or coughing frequently.

Other ways to express love and care:

- Apply lotion to hands or skin
- Comb or style hair, apply makeup or dress in favorite clothing
- Gentle massage
- Manicure or pedicure
- Read from a favorite book or magazine
- Narrate a photo album or tell favorite life stories
- Sing, play music or watch a favorite show together
- Give an update about a sports team, hobby or family members