



# IN TOUCH

HOSPICE OF THE VALLEY DEMENTIA NEWSLETTER

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## Eating and Food

Food is a form of comfort for people with advanced dementia and may continue to be enjoyed until the last days of life (Alonzo, 2004). However, eating can be a challenge for persons with advanced dementia. It is important for caregivers to adopt new approaches to eating and dining. These approaches can maximize opportunities for persons with advanced dementia to enjoy the fulfillment of food and fluids.

Another issue for individuals with advanced dementia is weight loss, which can be a result of cognitive changes, behavior issues, chewing and swallowing difficulties, caregiver approaches and environmental factors.

*The following practices and considerations may help address eating challenges in advanced dementia.*

Identify favorite foods of the person with dementia by consulting the *About Me* form. The person will often prefer “comfort foods” that are soft in texture and sweet in taste, such as ice cream, chocolate, mashed potatoes and gravy, milk shakes, fruit smoothies, or yogurt. Offer these pleasurable foods frequently throughout waking hours to optimize well-being.

Strive to modify meal and snack schedules to provide food when the person is ready to eat, rather than adhering to strict schedules. Serve smaller portions and offer only one or two food items at a time. Determine the food temperature that the individual prefers (Eddings, Alonzo, Jesus, Horton, Long, 2006).

Remove barriers to eating, such as commotion in the dining room, untreated pain and fatigue. (Eddings, Alonzo, Jesus, Horton, Long, 2006). Assess for any unmet comfort needs, especially pain, before offering food. Ensure that the person is positioned comfortably. Avoid over-stimulation by eliminating unpleasant noise and distraction in the dining area.

Use adaptive eating utensils when appropriate, in order to preserve an individual’s ability to feed him/herself for

as long as possible. It may be helpful to gently place the person’s hand on the eating utensil, demonstrate typical eating actions, or try hand-over-hand feeding to initiate self-feeding.

Current best practice guidelines focus on socialization and pleasure during mealtimes for persons with dementia (Crawley, 2002). Mealtime is a meaningful activity. It is a time to create comforting connections through sensory stimulation. Use direct eye contact, nurturing forms of touch, soothing music and a comforting tone of voice to enhance socialization and celebrate the lifelong tradition of sharing food.

### TIPS FOR EATING PRACTICES

- Serve meals in quiet locations, free from distractions
- Cue the individual with slow, simple, easy to understand instructions
- Allow plenty of time for the person to finish eating
- Serve soft, sweet foods that the individual prefers
- Make sure that basic needs (such as toileting) have been attended to prior to mealtime
- Have snacks and fluids available at all times during the day and night
- Encourage independence if the person can still feed him/herself
- Play soft and soothing music during the dining experience
- Maintain a comfortable temperature in the eating area
- Provide nutritionally dense foods, such as cheese cubes, pudding and sandwich halves



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## DID YOU KNOW?

- Being fed by someone can feel awkward. Have someone feed you a few bites, and see if you can find ways to make the experience more comfortable.
- Providing finger foods and offering one type of food at a time may encourage independence and maximize abilities.
- If a person turns their head away, clamps their mouth shut and/or spits out food while being assisted to eat, it may mean that they do not want to eat at that particular time, want something different to eat, or the bite is too big or too hot/cold.
- If you notice a change in eating patterns, conduct an oral exam to check for sores, loose teeth, ill-fitting dentures or other problems.
- Inviting persons with dementia to contribute to meal preparation (based on their abilities) may encourage eating and stimulate appetite.
- Environmental modifications may increase eating and drinking. In a 2003 study, the use of red and blue plates, cups and flatware, which contrasted in color to the food and drink served, resulted in a significant increase in consumption of both food and fluid (Dunne et al).
- Studies suggest that pleasant background music during mealtime increases socialization, decreases restlessness and wandering, and increases intake of desserts in persons with dementia.