



# Dinner with Dementia: A Caregiver's Guide



## THE FAMILY DINNER PROJECT

# Dinner with Dementia: A Guide for Caregivers



Dementia symptoms can cause challenges with every aspect of mealtime, from physical and nutritional to social and emotional struggles, impacting both the person with dementia and their caregivers.

But despite the difficulties, improving mealtime for people with dementia is critical to improving nutrition, hydration, weight stability, and loneliness. Eating with others has been shown to increase the amount and variety of food intake in older adults. Social eating increases the amount of time sitting at the table, allows for more diverse foods to be available, and can improve mood, which itself improves appetite.

Mealtimes can ease social interaction for families, allowing connection without the need for a constant flow of conversation, and offering togetherness at a time when other social opportunities may be shrinking. Shared meals are a time to feel part of a family, for listening and experiencing connection and comfort. And they can preserve a person with dementia's agency around food choices and food preparation, helping maintain a critical sense of identity.

This guide is intended to help caregivers and people with dementia share in more meaningful, positive mealtimes to boost physical, social, and emotional wellbeing.



## Family Caregiver Strategies

*to maintain mealtime as a meaningful SOCIAL activity*



- Practice using a positive tone and sharing words of appreciation
- Maintain a sense of humor
- Remember that listening is an important way to be socially engaged and participate – the person with dementia does not have to talk if it's difficult
- Read letters and emails aloud to promote connection with family and friends
- Educate family members about helpful strategies, like not correcting or contradicting the person with dementia

- Ask questions focused on preferences and opinions
- Rehearse names and connections before getting together with others
- Fill a jar with short messages and memories from family members that can be shared during the meal
- Talk about the food. Sometimes that will spark a memory
- Allow for shorter meals or breaks as needed
- As dementia progresses, limit the size of groups at meals to lower stress



**Key Tip:** *Slow down the pace of conversations, help to find words, take extra time to listen, and name other members at the table while you're talking during the meal.*



## Tips and Tools for Caregivers

### *Keeping your loved one engaged in meal-adjacent routines*

Often, our loved ones with dementia have been accustomed to participating in the routines and activities that surround mealtime, like going grocery shopping, choosing recipes and ingredients, preparing and cooking food, setting the table, and cleaning up afterward. For couples, especially, keeping the partner with dementia actively engaged in some of those routines can be important to maintaining their bond. Offering the opportunity to continue working alongside others on some of these meal-adjacent tasks is also a way to confer continued dignity and autonomy on a person with dementia, who may feel a loss of purpose or identity due to their symptoms.

- Before shopping, suggest two or three meals that the person with dementia usually enjoys, and ask them to choose one that can be made that week
- Offer the opportunity to add to the grocery list. Asking them to choose between two items can be helpful if it's hard to generate ideas on their own: "Ice cream or cookies? Cereal or oatmeal?"
- If possible, take them shopping with you. Choose an off-peak hour when the store will be less crowded and the person with dementia is likely to feel well, or choose a smaller store that offers a limited selection of items to "just grab a few things"
- Set them up in a comfortable, safe spot with ingredients and tools to work on a food preparation task. Tossing salad, mixing ingredients, peeling carrots, or washing vegetables are all useful and generally safe tasks they may be able to complete. If food preparation isn't possible, offer jobs like folding napkins or fetching silverware to keep them engaged
- If they are interested, allow the person with dementia to smell, taste, and touch ingredients. Ask questions like "Is it cold?" or "How does it feel?" to encourage communication



**Key Tip:** *Share your own food-related memories as you work together. "I remember when we first made these cookies. We accidentally set the oven too high and burned them, but Dad ate them anyway!"*



## Family Caregiver Strategies *to encourage EATING at mealtimes*



- Try to maintain patience and persistence around mealtimes
- Avoid confrontation when food is refused. Try again later to reintroduce the rejected food
- Cut food into small pieces to make chewing and swallowing easier
- Offer more finger foods to foster independence
- Offer a greater variety of smaller portions in one meal to keep from overwhelming the person with dementia

- Serve familiar foods
- Provide verbal cues about food to encourage eating
- Offer hand-on-hand assistance to bring food to the mouth
- Give one-on-one encouragement during meals
- Use plates that offer high color contrast to make food more visible
- Have a consistent dedicated place to eat
- Reduce sensory stimulation; for example, turn off the radio and TV



**Key Tip:** *As a caregiver, it's easy to feel discouraged or like you're "doing it wrong" when a loved one struggles to eat. Take care of yourself, too. You're doing your best.*



## Family Caregiver Strategies *to encourage EATING at mealtimes*

Loss of smell, or distortions to the sense of smell, is common to those with dementia. Since smell is so closely tied to taste, sometimes people no longer like some of the savory foods they used to enjoy. They may gravitate toward sweet tastes instead, since these taste buds typically still work well.

It can be frustrating for a caregiver to make a favorite dish and have the person with dementia push it away saying, “It doesn’t taste the same.” Loss of smell may be a contributing factor to weight loss. Try these tips to help overcome food aversions resulting from changes in your loved one’s sense of smell.

- Try preparing nutritious foods that are naturally sweet, like sweet potatoes or carrots.
- Increase the amount of flavoring used in preparing savory dishes to help compensate for the loss of smell. For example, try doubling the amount of lemon zest, cinnamon, or soy sauce in a dish.
- Consider adding spiciness to dishes with cayenne, tabasco, curry powder, or black pepper. The ability to perceive the “heat” isn’t tied to our sense of smell, so it may make food more palatable.



**Key Tip:** *If your loved one is consistently refusing formerly preferred foods, it may be an opportunity to branch out. Try more pungent foods like Thai or Indian curries, even if they wouldn’t have been accepted before.*



## Encouraging Eating at Mealtimes

### *What Clinicians Have to Say*

The Alzheimer's Association recommends a **person-centered approach** to dementia care. Clinicians say this is the most effective way to help people with dementia get the nutrition they need. That means working *with* the person to help them with their eating tasks, not trying to take over and complete the tasks for them.

A person-centered approach focuses on engaging and motivating the person with dementia based on their own individual preferences, needs, and abilities. Some examples of how that might look at mealtime include:

- Offering choices in food. If one food is refused, you can offer another
- Offering foods that can be picked up by hand
- Pre-loading utensils with food so the person can more easily feed themselves
- Sitting facing one another to help facilitate eating
- Using positive gestures and facial expressions like smiling, blowing kisses, or pats on the back to encourage eating
- If conversation is distracting, try playing music instead
- Assessing for comfort and looking for nonverbal signs that the person may be uncomfortable – too cold, too warm, not seated comfortably
- Using the person's name to convey respect, establish a connection, and acknowledge their identity
- Accommodate their needs with tools like larger utensils, sippy cups, or mugs with wider handles, rather than force feeding them
- Prevent distraction at mealtimes by clearing clutter and only having one plate or bowl in front of the person at a time
- Serve small portions on smaller plates, as too much can be overwhelming



***Key Tip: People with dementia often experience changes in smell, taste, and texture tolerance. Pay attention to changes in food preferences and offer choices with similar qualities to improve the chance of acceptance.***



## Caregiver Strategies *for mealtime communication in memory care*



- Stimulate as much communication as you can, both verbal and nonverbal
- Think of ways you can show care through nonverbal interactions. Smile, eye gaze, moving closer, nodding...
- Remember that talking while eating is hard for people with dementia. In memory care, talking happens while food is being delivered and cleared away
- Serving food family-style has been shown to increase communication at meals, when combined with caregiver prompts. “Do you want some of that?” “Is this enough for you?”

- If the person with dementia is verbal, you can encourage more communication with questions that lean on imagination or creativity instead of memory recall. Try asking things like:
  - If you could fly, where would you go?
  - If you could see anything out your window, what would you want to see?
  - If you could close your eyes and be anywhere in the world when you opened them, where would you want to be?



***Key Tip: Agitation and food refusal are communication. Offer choices to help figure out their needs. “Are you too cold? Want a sandwich instead? Do you want a drink? Are you finished?”***



## Common Challenges

If you're navigating caring for a loved one with dementia, it can be hard to know what to expect. Here are some facts about the kinds of challenges a person with dementia might experience when it comes to food and mealtime activities, based on the latest research.

### Physical and Nutritional Issues

74-78% of people with dementia experience mealtime challenges. 68-70% experience low food intake, 94% are at risk for malnutrition, and somewhere between 44% and 66.5% are actually malnourished.

People with dementia may experience a partial or complete loss of their ability to sustain attention to feeding tasks. They might not be able to get food into their mouths, and may struggle with chewing or swallowing.

Almost half of people with dementia lose their self-feeding ability within 8 years of the onset of dementia.

### Social and Behavioral Changes

People with dementia might show behavioral changes at mealtimes. They might seem agitated, wander, or pace. They might seem indifferent or apathetic about eating, or may refuse food altogether. They might seem disoriented by the time or place of the meal, or be distracted and overwhelmed by background noise like the television, or the presence of other people.

Changes in their enjoyment of food and eating with others can lead to a decline in appetite, changes in their dietary habits, low food intake, poor oral health and hygiene, and a lack of alertness due to low nutrition.

### The Impact On You, Their Caregiver

Mealtime challenges are associated with caregiver stress, relationship strain, distress, and loneliness. Family caregivers say they often feel unsupported or uninformed about how to feed their loved ones. Reduced food intake, weight loss, and wasting can cause considerable anxiety for caregivers.



## Sources

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