

## Nutrition and Dietetics

# Dementia Care – A Practical Guide to Swallowing Problems

People with dementia can experience difficulties with chewing and swallowing as their condition progresses. This may affect how well they eat and drink. If the causes of chewing and swallowing problems are identified and acted upon, the risk of malnutrition can be reduced.

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This leaflet contains a lot of information. It may not all be relevant for you. The contents list below will help you select the right topic.

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### **Problems within the mouth**

It is important to rule out some common causes that may affect how a person is eating and drinking, for example, sore gums, ill fitting dentures, a dry mouth, or oral thrush.

How to identify a sore mouth or gums:

- Do their gums look red and inflamed or do they appear to bleed easily when touched or when teeth are cleaned?
- Do they have mouth ulcers?
- Do they have bad breath or complain about a bad taste in the mouth?

How to identify sensitive or painful teeth:

- Do they show discomfort with cold foods e.g. ice cream?
- Do they have signs of gum disease? (See above).
- Do their teeth look loose, or in bad condition e.g. broken or discoloured?
- Do they have bad breath or complain about a bad taste in the mouth?

### **Do dentures or dental plates still fit correctly?**

Often if people have lost weight, gums can shrink and dentures become loose. This can cause sores in the mouth or an excess of saliva. If the person seems reluctant to wear their dentures, this may be their way of telling you that there is a problem.

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### **Do they have a dry mouth?**

This could be caused by some medications, mouth breathing, very warm environments or the person may not be drinking enough.

If you feel that it may be a side effect of medications, discuss this with your doctor. It is important that you take medical advice before stopping any medication.

### **Temporary illness that may cause swallowing problems**

Any infection or illness, for example, a urine infection, chest infection, cold or sore throat, may affect swallowing and increase confusion. If you suspect an infection, seek advice from your General Practitioner (GP) and encourage plenty of fluids.

If a cold or sore throat is affecting the person's eating and drinking, discuss this with your local pharmacist, GP or practice nurse. Offer frequent drinks and soft moist foods that are easier to swallow.

### **Oral care**

Establishing a good relationship with your dentist in the early stages of the condition can help the person become familiar with the dental practice and the staff. This will help to make it less frightening and confusing as the disease progresses. Let the dentist or dental practice staff know about the person's condition before a consultation.

Dental care will vary depending on the stage of dementia progression. If the person you care for is having high sugar food or nutritional supplements, this can increase the risk of tooth decay. It is important to maintain good mouth and tooth care for as long as possible to minimise the risk of infection or tooth decay.

Further advice on oral care can be found in the following leaflets:

- Dementia Care - A Practical Guide to Eating and Drinking (available from your local dietitian.)
- Dental Care and Dementia (Alzheimer's UK – see page 7 for details).

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### **Where to go for help?**

It is important that you get help if there are any problems with the person's teeth or mouth. Your GP or Dentist can provide further advice. If you do not have a dentist, contact the new NHS 111 service (see page 8).

If the person you are caring for is housebound, there may be a community dental service available - ask your GP or healthcare professional.

Some private dentists will visit patients at home if trips out for the person with dementia are not possible.

### **What can I do while I wait for treatment?**

You may not be able to see your dentist or GP straight away so in the meantime:

- Your local pharmacist should be able to provide an “over the counter” treatment to soothe mouth ulcers.
- A fixadent may help in the short term if dentures are loose.
- Offer soft moist food that requires minimal chewing, add gravies and sauces.
- Encourage regular drinks, even if the person only drinks small quantities each time.
- If you are concerned the person is not drinking enough, consider offering foods with a higher water content, for example, jelly, ice cream, custard, yoghurts, and soups.

### **How to identify swallowing problems**

Key signs to look for include:

- Repeated bouts of chest infections or pneumonia
- Repeated coughing, throat clearing or choking after swallowing food or drink
- A wet sounding voice after swallowing
- Expressing fear during eating
- A reluctance to eat and drink
- Holding food in the mouth

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- Packing food into the cheeks
- Swallowing several times on one bite
- Grimacing when swallowing
- Tilting the head back to eat and drink
- Food or liquid falling out of the mouth or drooling liquids from the mouth
- Exaggerated movements of the jaw, lips or tongue
- A delay in swallowing after the food has been chewed
- Tiredness during or after a meal
- Weight loss over time

**If you have concerns about a person's swallow, ask your GP or consultant to refer them to a Speech and Language Therapist for a swallow assessment.**

**The following section should not be used as a replacement for specialist advice from a Speech and Language Therapist.**

### **What can I do while we are waiting for a Speech and Language Therapy assessment?**

- Provide soft moist foods which are easy to mash
- Offer the person the opportunity to self feed where possible
- Ensure foods are not too hot or too cold
- Ensure the person is sat in an upright position and is well supported to eat and drink
- Sit at eye level if you are assisting them to eat
- Try using smaller utensils, such as a teaspoon. If the person is self feeding, give them the teaspoon or assistance loading up the spoon
- Limit distractions in the eating environment
- Don't rush feeding
- Encourage the person not to talk when they are eating
- Make sure the person is ready to eat: glasses on, hearing aids switched on, dentures in place

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- Remind the person to chew the food thoroughly
- After the meal encourage them to clear their mouth

### **What if the person doesn't have a swallowing problem but there are issues with eating and drinking?**

A number of behavioural challenges can arise as dementia progresses. These can include:

- Refusing to swallow
- Pouching food in the mouth
- Cramming too much food in the mouth
- Biting down hard on feeding utensils

This section contains some ideas to help. You may also find some further information in the leaflet: **Dementia Care – A Practical Guide to Eating and Drinking** (available from your local dietitian)

### **Refusal to swallow, pouching food or excessive chewing**

The following ideas may help stimulate swallowing:

- Use frequent verbal prompts
- Offer smaller bites of moist food
- Encourage highly flavoured food and drinks as these provide more stimulation to the brain to prompt a swallow response
- Alternate temperature and taste within meals, for example, warm stewed apple with ice cream, or curry with yoghurt
- Keep the eating area free from distractions
- Allow plenty of time for meals
- Once you have noticed that the person has chewed the food adequately remind them to swallow
- If they do not respond to a verbal prompt to swallow, putting the spoon or fork back up towards the mouth as if you are offering the next mouthful may remind the person to swallow

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### **Cramming food into the mouth**

People with dementia may try to cram food in too quickly or place several mouthfuls in without swallowing. The following tips may help:

- Try hand over hand feeding. Put your hand over the hand of the person who has dementia and gently guide them with your hand to slow them down
- Use small utensils, such as a teaspoon, to limit the amount they can put in with each mouthful
- Make frequent verbal prompts to chew and swallow each mouthful before placing another in the mouth

You may also find that some of the points mentioned in the section above may help.

### **Biting down hard on utensils**

People with dementia may be very sensitive to having cutlery in the mouth, for example, a cold metal spoon. Avoid hard metal cutlery, large cutlery or easily breakable utensils. Lightweight but durable plastic cutlery is recommended, such as specialist polycarbonate cutlery.

You could also try hand and over hand feeding (see page 5).

**If you continue to have concerns, discuss with your GP or Consultant whether a referral to a Speech and Language Therapist for a specialist swallow assessment is required.**

### **Further Information**

This leaflet is supplementary to the leaflet Dementia Care - A Practical Guide to Eating and Drinking. A copy of this can be obtained from your local dietitian. The following organisations can also provide further information.

#### **Alzheimer's Society (UK)**

Alzheimer's Society  
43-45 Crutched Friars,

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London,  
EC3N 2AE.

Helpline: 0300 222 1122

Email: [enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk)

Website: [www.alzheimers.org.uk](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk)

**Useful Alzheimer's UK fact sheets (available to print from the website or a copy can be requested by calling 0300 222 1122):**

- Eating and drinking
- Dental care and dementia
- Food for Thought – Difficulties eating and drinking
- Food for thought - Preparing meals
- Food for thought – The eating environment
- Food for thought – Finger foods

## Age UK

Age UK Headquarters

Tavis House

1-6 Tavistock Square

London

WC1H 9NA

Advice line Tel: 0800 169 2081

Website: [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)

You can also contact them via email using the online email form in the “contact me” section of the website.

## NHS 111 (previously NHS Direct)

If you have a non-urgent medical query or need information about a health related issue, contact NHS 111 by dialling 111.

## NHS Choices

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

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This website provides fact sheets and information on health conditions. Enter the word “Dementia” in the search box to see information and support available.

### **Specialist equipment and assistive devices**

There are a variety of shops in Coventry and Warwickshire where you can buy a number of aids to help with daily living, for example, Boots and Nottingham Rehabilitation Supplies. You can also ask the person’s occupational therapist for advice.

#### **Boots**

Contact your local store or call the national customer services on 0345 070 8090.

#### **Nottingham Rehabilitation Supplies**

Tel: 00345 121 8111

Website: [www.nrshealthcare.co.uk](http://www.nrshealthcare.co.uk)

#### **Living made easy**

Helpline: 0300 999 0004

Website: [www.livingmadeeasy.org.uk](http://www.livingmadeeasy.org.uk)

#### **FIND Memory Care**

Telephone: 0113 230 2046

Website: [www.findsignage.co.uk](http://www.findsignage.co.uk)

## **Local Services**

### **Local Meal Delivery Services**

#### **Warwickshire**

##### **Apetito**

Telephone: 01926 889511

Website: [www.warwickshire.gov.uk/mealsservice](http://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/mealsservice)

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### **Coventry**

#### **iCare Community Meals**

Telephone: 0845 604 1125

Website: [www.icarecuisine.co.uk](http://www.icarecuisine.co.uk)

The following companies also provide a frozen meals delivery service:

### **Wiltshire Farm Foods**

Telephone: 0800 077 3100

Website: [www.wiltshirefarmfoods.com](http://www.wiltshirefarmfoods.com)

### **Oakhouse Foods**

Telephone: 0333 370 6700

Website: [www.oakhousefoods.co.uk](http://www.oakhousefoods.co.uk)

### **Gill's Kitchen**

Telephone: 020 8807 6584

Website: [www.mrgills.co.uk](http://www.mrgills.co.uk) (for modified texture meals, e.g. pureed meals).

If you have any queries about this guide, please contact your local dietetic department:

### **Dietetic Services**

George Eliot Hospital, Nuneaton

Telephone: 024 7686 5098

Hospital of St Cross, Rugby

Telephone: 01788 663473

University Hospital of Coventry and Warwickshire (UHCW)

Telephone: 024 7696 6161

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Warwick Hospital

Telephone: 01926 495321 ext 4258

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please ask and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy

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To give feedback on this leaflet please email [feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk](mailto:feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk)

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