Strategies For Mealtime Challenges

DREAM
Dementia Resources for Eating Activity & Meaningful Inclusion

In this factsheet, you will learn about:

- Some mealtime challenges that people with dementia may experience
- Strategies to adapt mealtimes for success and enjoyment

Forgetting to eat or drink

- Schedule meals and snacks at a similar time each day
- Set an alarm or leave a note as a reminder to eat and drink
- Have a friend or family member remind you when it's time to eat or drink
- Eat with others because they can help to keep track when it is time for the next meal and/or snack

Difficulty finding items

- Label cupboards to indicate what is inside
- Keep commonly used items accessible by being within reach and visible
- For a specific mealtime activity, like making coffee, store all the supplies in the same area

Ask for directions and help if you need it!

Difficulty cooking or using kitchen appliances

- Create cue cards with instructions on how to use an appliance
- Set a timer to indicate when something is done cooking
- Use appliances with automatic shut-off, or put a sticker on the “off” button for appliances as a reminder
- Work in pairs for kitchen duties

Difficulty chewing or swallowing

- Sit up straight with your head facing forward
- Take time to chew carefully, and pause to swallow between bites
- Prepare food so that it is easy to chew and swallow: chop, mash, shred, or purée foods with a knife, blender, or food processor
- Add gravy, cream, or other sauces to help soften and moisten food
- See a dentist or denturist if chewing is a challenge
- Visit a primary healthcare provider to ask for a referral to a speech language pathologist if swallowing is a challenge
- Learn First Aid in case choking occurs

Difficulty self-feeding or hydrating

- Use adaptive utensils or vessels as needed, such as weighted utensils, curved utensils, or lidded cups
- Place mats or a wet cloth underneath dishware to prevent slipping
- Serve finger foods to make eating easier, including sandwiches, wraps, or chopped vegetables and fruits

Eating inedible items

- Remove inedible items, such as wrappers, candles, or centre pieces from the table
- Season meals in the kitchen with spices and condiments to limit the number of items on the table
- Use durable utensils and dishware to prevent them from being broken, chewed, and/or swallowed – avoid plastic when possible

Eating too much

- Eat slowly and appreciate the food's appearance, smell, texture, and taste
- Have high protein and high fibre foods at each meal and snack
- Drink water before, during, and between meals because thirst can sometimes be confused with hunger
- Set out vegetables, fruits, and other healthy low-calorie snacks or side dishes on the table

Eating too quickly

- Serve food and beverages at a safe temperature
- Eat one food item at a time and finish it before the next item
- To prevent choking, cut food into small pieces
- Put down utensils between bites and enjoy each bite as it is eaten
- Alternate sips of fluids with bites of food

Low appetite or lack of interest

- Be physically active before meals and snacks
- Create a comfortable and pleasant place to eat and drink
- Have nutrient-dense foods and beverages high in protein and calories that you enjoy
- Add flavor using herbs and spices
- Serve food and beverages at a desirable and safe temperature
- Eat and drink with others

Leaving before the meal is done

- Get involved in mealtime activities as much as possible
- If you feel overwhelmed and want to leave the table, let someone know, perhaps a quieter option is available
- Eat slowly and appreciate the food's appearance, smell, texture, and taste
- Take finger foods that can be eaten while walking
- Pour beverages in a to-go mug or bottle that can be drank while walking

Becoming overwhelmed

- Set the table with just what is needed to avoid confusion and/or distraction
- Try to keep the environment as calm and relaxing as possible, such as minimizing noise, or choose to eat with a smaller group