

Community Health

Strategies for Feeding Your Loved Ones with Dementia



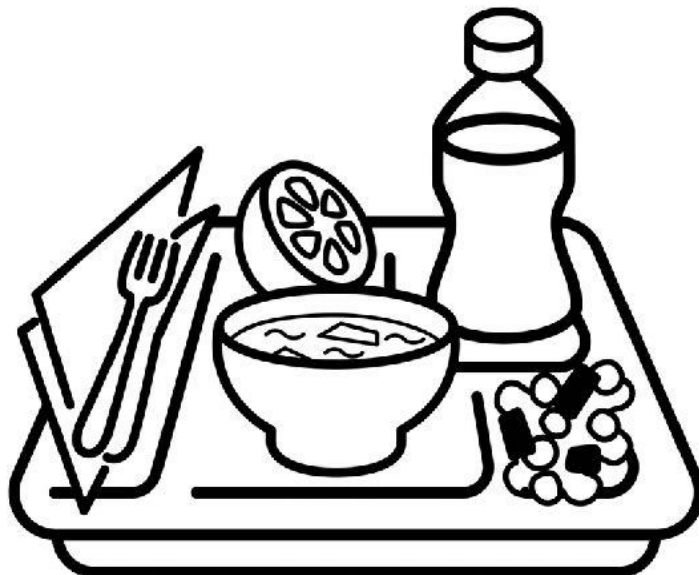
Dementia with Food Refusal

This educational material is brought to you by the following department:

- Community Health Team

Food refusal is when an individual refuses to eat all or most foods presented to them, and it is commonly seen in people with dementia. It can be managed with several feeding strategies.

Discuss with your healthcare provider on which feeding strategy will be most suitable for you and your loved ones.



Connection Between Dementia and Appetite

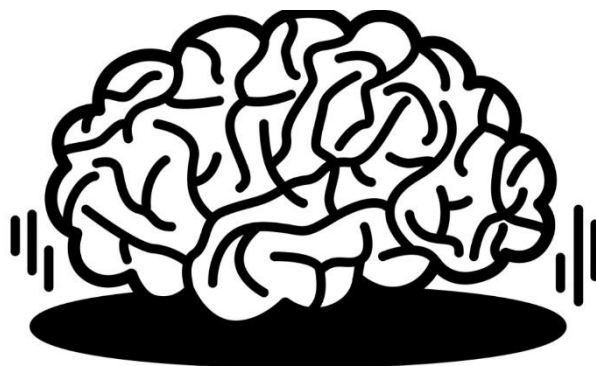
Eating and drinking are complex processes. Both processes require the use of :

- The throat muscles
- The brain's control centre (responsible for managing emotions)

When dementia progresses, it affects these two body parts and you may experience symptoms such as coughing when eating.

Other signs that may also suggest the progression of dementia include:

- Holding food in the mouth, refusing to swallow, spitting out food and frowning when swallowing



Reasons for Food Refusal in People with Dementia

Here are some reasons why people with dementia may experience food refusal:

- They have a new or worsening illness (e.g. infection, constipation)
- They are experiencing pain or discomfort
- They are experiencing depression or anxiety
- They are taking medications that may cause side effects such as nausea/vomiting, loss of appetite or stomach discomfort
- They are tired or lack adequate physical activity which decreases the body's need for energy, hence decreasing their hunger level
- There are changes in their environment or people around them, which makes it hard for them to adapt to new eating environments/ people around them
- They have poor oral hygiene/ dental issues (e.g. poorly fitted dentures or fake teeth, loose/ missing/ decayed teeth, etc.) which makes them feel uncomfortable when eating
- They are unable to express their needs appropriately (e.g. they may hold food in their mouth or refuse to eat to show that they dislike the food)



Types of Feeding Difficulties and Strategies to Overcome Them

Here are five common types of feeding difficulties faced by people with dementia:

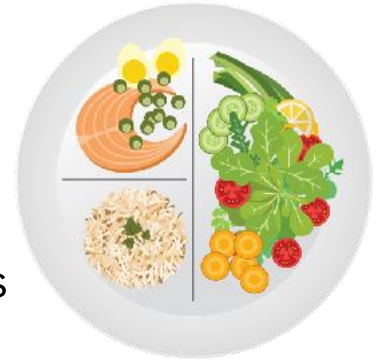
- a. Initiating Feeding
- b. Sustaining Attention
- c. Getting Food into the Mouth
- d. Chewing Food
- e. Swallowing Food



Types of Feeding Difficulties and Strategies to Overcome Them

a. Initiating Feeding

- **If your loved one refuses food or has violent reactions when being fed,**
 - Try to feed them at another timing
 - Give gentle verbal encouragements such as praising the food is good
 - Play their favourite song or relaxing music to reduce any agitation
 - Try to include familiar foods or foods they prefer in their diet
 - Sit down with them and make eye contact when you are feeding them
 - Always carefully try to open their mouth with a spoon, without using any force
 - Allocate sufficient time for eating or feeding
- **If your loved one is unable to see the plate on the table or food on the plate,**
 - Ensure that the plate, table and food are of different colours to increase contrast and help with visibility
 - Check that they are wearing their glasses during mealtime, if necessary



Types of Feeding Difficulties and Strategies to Overcome Them

b. Sustaining Attention

- If your loved one is easily distracted,
 - Increase oral stimulation by offering them ice or cold water before eating
 - Remove environmental distractions (e.g. turn off the TV or radio)
 - Give them finger foods which can be eaten while they are away from the dining table
 - Encourage their appetite by using fragrant ingredients (e.g. onions, garlic) or different coloured and textured foods
 - Remind them to take food from their plate to their mouth (e.g. hold their hand and move it from their mouth to the food and back again)



- If your loved one is too drowsy to eat or if it is difficult to wake them up,

- Give verbal encouragements and gently touch them
- Try to feed them at another timing



Types of Feeding Difficulties and Strategies to Overcome Them

c. Getting Food into the Mouth

- If your loved one is unable to open their mouth,
 - Use a syringe to insert food into their mouth, if advised by their healthcare professional to do so



- If your loved one is unable to keep food in their mouth,
 - Feed them more solid food, if advised by their healthcare professional to do so

d. Chewing Food

- If your loved one is unable to chew well,
 - Give them smaller portions of food each time
 - Change their diet from solid to soft or semi-liquid foods (e.g. porridge)



Types of Feeding Difficulties and Strategies to Overcome Them

e. Swallowing Food

- If your loved one has difficulties swallowing food,
 - Always ensure that they eat sitting upright at a 90 degree angle
 - Gently stroke their throat to assist them in swallowing food
 - Use thickeners in drinks to help slow down the liquid travelling down the throat which makes them easier to control, if advised by their healthcare professional to do so



Things to Note

- If you notice your loved ones are coughing when drinking or eating, stop feeding them for a moment.
- Ensure that your loved ones have swallowed each mouthful of food or drink completely before giving them the next feed.
- If your loved ones consistently cough when drinking or eating, please seek advice from their healthcare professional.



Things to Note

- If your loved ones are no longer eating or accepting food despite using the recommended strategies, you may have a conversation with your loved ones' doctor about whether it is advisable to prolong their life through hydration and artificial nutrition (i.e. tube feeding).
- If your loved ones have an advanced medical directive/ advanced care planning/ living will, you can follow their wishes as stated by them.



Community Health
TTSH Annex 2, Level 3

Contact:

6256 6011 (General Enquiry Hotline)

6357 7000 (Central Hotline)



Scan this QR Code with your
smart phone to access the
information online or visit
<http://bit.ly/TTSHHealth-Library>



Scan this QR Code with
your mobile phone to view
this booklet online at
TTSH Health Library

Was this information helpful?
Please feel free to email us if you have
any feedback regarding what you have
just read at
patienteducation@ttsh.com.sg



© Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Singapore 2022. All rights reserved. All information correct as of August 2022. No part of this document may be reproduced, copied, reverse compiled, adapted, distributed, commercially exploited, displayed or stored in a database, retrieval system or transmitted in any form without prior permission of Tan Tock Seng Hospital. All information and material found in this document are for purposes of information only and are not meant to substitute any advice provided by your own physician or other medical professionals.