



Nutrition and the Alzheimer's Patient

Many Alzheimer's patients have problems eating. This problem can come from many different factors, such as poor-fitting dentures, problems swallowing and loss of appetite.

The nutritional problem seen in most patients is weight loss. Weight loss may be due to distractions (noises, odors, conversations) while eating. When distracted, the person may eat less or not at all.

The person caring for an Alzheimer's patient should find ways to encourage food intake and reduce mealtime confusion. The Alzheimer's Alliance suggests the following:

- Provide calm surroundings at mealtime. Minimize interruptions, loud noises and abrupt movements.
- Put only one item of food on the plate at a time.
- Avoid patterned plates, tablecloths and placemats which might confuse and distract the person. In most cases, use plain white plates or bowls and a contrasting placemat.
- Make positive use of distractions. If the person resists eating, take a break, involve him or her in another activity and return to eating later.
- Use memory aids to remind the person about meal times. Try a clock with large numbers and an easy to read appointment calendar with large letters and numbers or a chalk or bulletin board for recording the daily schedule.

There are nutritional factors which should be taken into account when caring for an Alzheimer's patient. The following are suggestions by the Alzheimer's Alliance which help a patient stay healthy:

- Serve several small meals rather than three large ones.
- Serve finger foods or serve the meal in the form of a sandwich.
- Don't serve steaming or extremely hot foods or liquids.
- Limit highly salted foods or sweets if the person has a chronic health problem, such as diabetes or hypertension.
- Fill in gaps between regular meals with healthy snacks.

If the individuals have trouble swallowing, food intake will be affected. The Alzheimer's Alliance recommends the following:

- Blending the food or alternating small bites of food with a drink.
- Substitute fruit juice, gelatin, foods cooked with water, sherbet, fruit or soup.

- Serve mashed potatoes rather than fried potatoes.
- Offer bite-size pieces of cooked meat, turkey or chicken instead of sliced meat.

Set aside plenty of time for meals and give the person enough time to swallow before presenting the next bite or drink. It also is suggested the individual sit at a 90-degree angle to avoid backup of food into the throat.

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