

# Challenges at Mealtimes

## For families living with dementia

The following table presents challenges that Eating Together families have identified. Strategies that they have used to overcome these areas of concern are provided as well. These suggestions may help you now or in the future, or help you to think creatively to solve other mealtime concerns.

Challenges	Strategy
<p><b>Sometimes interest in eating is poor. These suggestions may help to stimulate appetite.</b></p>	<p>Change the Setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invite additional family members to the meal.</li> <li>• Reduce distractions. Try turning off the television.</li> <li>• Create a comfortable environment. This may be soft music during the meal, watching the birds, or making sure the temperature is comfortable.</li> </ul> <p>Prepare an Appetizing Meal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know specific tastes and preferences of the person with dementia.</li> <li>• Instruct the others who provide care to make appetizing meals.</li> <li>• Create visual appeal with colour and shapes of foods.</li> <li>• Make a meal that will be mutually enjoyable.</li> <li>• Portion out the food before sitting at the table.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Sometimes changing the setting and food provided is not enough to get someone to eat. Here are some further suggestions.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid nagging and criticism.</li> <li>• Use “soft and gentle” verbal reminders.</li> <li>• Start to eat, this can act as a cue to others to eat.</li> <li>• Try providing some physical assistance to get started with eating, such as giving a spoon.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Meals can change in a variety of ways which can cause stress. Try the following to make meals as enjoyable</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This first step is accepting changes and moving forward with making adaptations to how things are done to accommodate changing needs.</li> <li>• Be flexible. Remember what is most important about the meal, nourishing the body and being together.</li> <li>• Slow down the pace of conversation.</li> </ul>

<p><b>as possible.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain a routine. Consistency helps to overcome feeling overwhelmed. Some routines suggested by families were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>“Honour” a specific seat</i></li> <li><i>Eat in the same environment</i></li> <li><i>Plate the food vs. serving family style</i></li> <li><i>Say a prayer before the meal</i></li> <li><i>Prepare an appetizer</i></li> <li><i>Observe holidays traditions</i></li> <li><i>Embrace before the meal</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Loosen up some social rules such as eating with a fork and knife. Provide only one utensil, or prepare finger foods.</li> <li>• Mix up the menu so that there are hot and cold foods, familiar and less familiar foods and tastes.</li> <li>• Select people who are understanding of the diagnosis to dine with.</li> <li>• Use meals as a way to stay connected even with busy work and social schedules.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Simplifying cooking and meals is a way to still enjoy eating together with less time and fuss.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare large amounts of food when you have time and energy and freeze it for later use.</li> <li>• Buy some convenience foods from bulk stores (e.g. individually frozen entrees, meat courses).</li> <li>• Buy pre-made frozen dinners.</li> <li>• Bring take-out food into the home.</li> <li>• Use Meals-On-Wheels or another meal delivery service.</li> <li>• Look for one -pot recipes or mixed dishes that contain all the nutrition you need.</li> <li>• When entertaining accept offers to bring food items, limit your guest list, and plan to serve simple dishes. Buy pre-made foods or even consider a caterer for those special events.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Eating out is a nice way to take a break, socialize and experience a new environment. Sometimes eating out can be challenging. Here`s how to keep doing</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be spontaneous- eat out to celebrate or when you need a break.</li> <li>• Eat out in familiar places.</li> <li>• Try going earlier or at non-peak times so that you have lots of time and don`t feel rushed or overwhelmed.</li> <li>• Seniors menus, discount cards or going out for a snack rather than a meal can allow for being spontaneous and eating outside of the home, even if your budget is tight.</li> <li>• Use the Alzheimer Society business card for partners in care.</li> </ul>

**this fun activity.**

- Choose well-lit, family-style restaurants.
- Be choosy about where you sit. If a quiet corner is best, ask for this preference. If being `close to the action` is enjoyed, then choose a table upfront where you can make conversation with others.
- Provide options for the person with dementia if the menu is long and complex. Menus with pictures are great to help with selections.
- Try to find restaurants with family washrooms if assistance is required.
- If eating with friends, make sure there is a companion of the same sex as the person with dementia so that they can be escorted to the washroom.
- Buffets can be helpful if seeing the food helps to stimulate a decision and eating of food.
- Think about manoeuvring with a cane, walker or wheelchair when considering type of dining (e.g. buffet) or type of restaurant and seating (fixed seats such as booths).
- Bill paying can be a challenge if the person with dementia is the one who usually pays. Credits cards can overcome the need for using cash. Debit machines can work well and you can always provide a gentle reminder for the personal identification number. Be respectful when providing assistance, whether checking the tip or indicating where to sign. Being criticized in a public place can lead to `blow-ups` or other emotional outbursts.
- When meeting with a familiar group, review names of individuals or other important information that may be required.
- Following group conversation can be a challenge. Try restating information to promote participation or asking a question to have information repeated.
- Ask for a ride if you are eating with others and transportation is difficult. Try visiting places that are in walking distance or close by. Use a taxi if you do not have a car for these outings, to make them even more special!
- Enjoy fast food restaurants, coffee shops or finger-type foods if you are worried about spills or prefer to eat with your hands.

<p><b>Mealtimes can be a way of demonstrating what we are good at and can do. Use the many activities involved in meals to demonstrate abilities.</b></p>	<p>Promote Independence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have interdependent roles during meal preparation- someone washes the vegetables while the other cuts them up.</li> <li>• Have independent roles during meal preparation and clean up; identify things that can be done without help or supervision such as making own breakfast, setting the table.</li> <li>• Assist with complex recipes- do the measuring or the counting of the measures; check off steps that have been completed.</li> <li>• Use cooking as an activity for support staff working with persons with dementia</li> <li>• Use appliances with easy to follow instructions or symbols.</li> </ul> <p>Maintaining a Sense of Control</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask opinion, seek participation in decisions such as timing of meal, what will be made etc.</li> <li>• Provide options and choice for how participation in the meal preparation will happen.</li> <li>• Ask for input or `how to` cook a meal if you are not the expert; be the learner rather than the teacher.</li> </ul> <p>Taking a Sensitive Approach to Making Suggestions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phrase questions so as to not push your own needs or agenda.</li> <li>• Be aware that how you say things affects the other`s self esteem and sense of being an independent person.</li> <li>• Acknowledge efforts to participate in mealtime preparation.</li> <li>• Don`t correct mistakes, especially with the other person around.</li> <li>• Do not correct behaviours in front of others.</li> <li>• Look for opportunities to provide praise.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Sometimes we realize that cooking and eating pose a risk. The following suggestions will help to address these risks while retaining dignity.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decide together on boundaries for mealtime activities. For example, mutually decide that using the stove will only occur when you are working together on a meal.</li> <li>• Use stickers or colourful tape for important buttons on appliances.</li> <li>• Leave hand-written, large print instructions in front or on the appliance (whichever is safest).</li> <li>• Most recipes can be readily adapted to a microwave which is more convenient and safer.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remove or disable unsafe appliances</li> <li>• When purchasing cheese, eggs, milk and meat, date the items with a marker on the package.</li> <li>• When visiting, scan the food supply for spoiled items. Clean the fridge out together or be subtle about seeing spoiled items and disposing them.</li> <li>• Always bring food with you if you live separate. Use this as an opportunity to restock</li> </ul>
<p><b>Being a care partner is hard work. You may have to learn new skills or do things differently every day. The following suggestions may help you.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accept that things always change. You can also change and adapt. Adopt a positive attitude that you have the ability to work through the challenge.</li> <li>• Find ways to deal with stress: relax with a book, get your frustrations out at work, through exercise, enjoy hobbies.</li> <li>• Routine helps... but also be spontaneous and take time out from routine when it is needed.</li> <li>• Recognize your boundaries and seek outside help when needed.</li> <li>• Develop your patience. Step away from the situation when you know that you can't take it anymore. Go to the washroom and take 10 deep breaths.</li> <li>• Pray, meditate or do a devotional or spiritual reading that provides you with a different perspective.</li> </ul>

This resource is a product of the Eating Together study. It is adapted from the thesis work of Abigail Wickson, RN, MSN, Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing, Ryerson University, entitled : "Serving up mealtime strategies: How families experience dementia in the community." The tips for eating out have been supplemented with strategies identified by Carly Cassolato RD, MSc, University of Guelph from her master's thesis entitled: Meaning and Experience of "Eating Out" in the dementia context.

© Eating Together