

# LONG TERM CARE COMMUNITY COALITION

*Advancing Quality, Dignity & Justice*

## SUPPORTING NUTRITION AND HYDRATION FOR INDIVIDUALS LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

### FACT SHEET FOR INDIVIDUALS LIVING AT HOME OR IN ASSISTED LIVING

Proper nutrition and hydration are essential for individuals living with dementia. They support brain function, physical health, and overall quality of life. Malnutrition can accelerate cognitive decline, while key nutrients help preserve memory, muscle strength, and mobility. Staying well-hydrated helps prevent complications such as infections, constipation, and confusion. However, dementia can create many challenges that make it harder to eat and drink regularly and safely. Cognitive, physical, and behavioral changes may affect a person's appetite, ability to recognize food, or swallow safely.

This fact sheet outlines common challenges related to nutrition and hydration and offers practical tips to support comfort, health, and well-being. For more resources, please visit our website, <https://nursinghome411.org/dementia-care-in-the-community>.

### Common Challenges

- **Cognitive Changes:** As dementia progresses, individuals may forget to eat or drink, not recognize food, or feel confused during meals. These cognitive impairments can lead to missed meals or dehydration.
- **Physical Difficulties:** Using utensils, chewing, or swallowing may become difficult due to motor skill loss (apraxia) or swallowing difficulties (dysphagia), which can increase the risk of choking or aspiration.
- **Loss of Appetite:** Appetite may decline due to changes in taste or smell, medication side effects, depression, or illness. This can lead to weight loss, lower energy, or malnutrition.
- **Dehydration:** People living with dementia may not feel thirsty or they may forget to drink fluids. Dehydration can exacerbate cognitive decline, cause urinary tract infections, and lead to serious health complications.

### Tips to Support Nutrition and Hydration

- **Create a Calm Mealtime Environment:**
  - Serve meals in a quiet, well-lit space with minimal distractions.
  - Keep table settings simple and uncluttered.
  - Use plates and utensils that contrast in color with the table to help with visibility.
- **Encourage Participation and Independence:**
  - Allow the person to help with setting the table or choosing meals.
  - Offer finger foods or adaptive utensils for easier self-feeding.
  - Provide gentle assistance as needed while still promoting dignity and independence.

- **Offer Nutritious, Appealing Foods:**

- Provide a balanced diet with fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.
- If appetite is low, offer small, frequent meals and high-calorie snacks.
- Use herbs or flavor enhancers to improve taste if food seems bland.

By being proactive and supportive, caregivers can help individuals with dementia stay well-nourished and hydrated, enhancing comfort, safety, and quality of life.

- **Monitor Swallowing and Food Texture:**

- Watch for signs of difficulty swallowing (e.g., coughing, pocketing food in the cheeks of the mouth).
- Modify food texture (e.g., soft, pureed foods or thickened liquids) if needed.
- Consult a healthcare provider or speech-language pathologist for a safe feeding plan.

- **Promote Regular Hydration:**

- Offer drinks frequently - even if the person doesn't ask.
- Use preferred beverages (e.g., flavored water, juice, or warm broth).
- Provide easy-to-hold cups or straws to support independent drinking.
- Consider offering hydrating snacks like fruit, gelatin, or popsicles.

- **Screen for Malnutrition and Dehydration:**

- Monitor weight, appetite, and energy levels regularly.
- Involve healthcare professionals in routine screenings.
- Keep a food and fluid log if intake becomes a concern.