

Changing tastes with dementia

We want people living with dementia to live well. We know that “eating the rainbow” (a wide variety of fruits and vegetables with lean cut meats) is the best. However, even early in the course of dementia, many people will have changes in food preferences. It is not uncommon for many to develop a liking for unhealthy “junk” food. Typically, the affected person will come to enjoy food with a softer texture and sweet flavor. The last thing we want for care partners to do is to become the food police. Your attempts to explain, reason and/or coerce the person to eat something they don’t want will end up in an unwanted argument. Use these tips instead:

1. Comfort foods often work best. Don’t feel like you need to be trying new recipes when the old one’s work! Stick to a simple menu that you know is familiar to your loved one and will be readily eaten.
2. Take things off the menu that are no longer pleasurable. Course meat that is hard to chew will go first, often followed by vegetables.
3. Don’t make eating a big issue. Food is not worth the fight; and despite your best attempts to provide a healthy diet, the dementia will progress.
4. Have a dedicated space for eating – especially as dementia progresses. Mealtime is social. Take this time to eat at the dinner table. Leave the TV off but maybe put on some music.
5. Over time, the person will lose the ability to manage utensils. Be ready to remove the ones that are not needed to reduce confusion. You will find the spoon becomes the universal utensil.
6. Finger foods are fine. We want the person to be able to feed themselves for as long as possible. Sandwiches, cut up fruit, cheese cubes, ice cream bars work fine.
7. When you leave out snacks, it is best to have those that can be unwrapped or have fruit that don’t need the skins removed.
8. For those who want to eat all of the time, prepare small baggies of snacks that can be given throughout the day. Look for those that are lower in calories but still enjoyable.
9. For those who don’t eat enough, think about how you can add calories. For example, put heavy cream in coffee; add lots of syrup to the pancakes; add lots of butter to mashed potatoes, gravy, etc.
10. Think about making shakes. You can add calories by using ice cream v. milk; fruit to sweeten v. fudge, protein powder as a meal substitute.
11. Bake some ready to go cookies or bread. The smell of fresh baked goods can increase appetite.
12. Adapt meals to match changing needs. While 3 meals/day work early in the disease, in time, 6 small meals throughout the day may work better.

Food is a universal way to express love and food will be enjoyed until the end of life. Focus on the pleasure of food and you can’t lose!