This booklet is for anyone caring for a person with dementia and provides useful information and tips on how to help them eat well.

It can be given out by any health and social care worker.
What is dementia?

Dementia is the term used to describe a collection of symptoms, including memory loss, mood changes and problems with speech and understanding.

Dementia is progressive, which means the symptoms will gradually get worse. Each person will experience dementia in a different way. People may have similar symptoms but the degree to which they affect each individual may vary. Some common symptoms of dementia include the following:

- Memory loss — especially short term, for example, forgetting what happened earlier in the day or the way home from the shops.
- Mood changes — people living with dementia may become withdrawn, agitated, anxious or scared about what is happening to them.
- Problems with speech and understanding — for example, difficulties finding the correct words for things.

Why is it important for people with dementia to eat well?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health for everyone. Illness and old age can put a strain on the body but good nutrition can help the body to maintain and improve strength, stay mobile and maintain independence.

How can dementia affect diet and nutrition?

Many people living with dementia may experience a change in their relationship with food, eating and drinking. As dementia progresses, the behavioural, emotional and physical changes that occur can make eating and drinking more difficult. The difficulties experienced will vary; some people with dementia will have a poor appetite or difficulty chewing and swallowing, whilst others may overeat. Depending on the individual, these changes can result in dehydration, weight loss or weight gain.

This can be upsetting at times and you may find it reassuring to understand how you can help the person you care for to eat and drink well. There are some simple ways that you can help a person with dementia to enjoy eating and drinking.

Over time, the person you care for may lose interest in eating and drinking. In this situation the focus should be on eating and drinking for pleasure and comfort.
**Weight loss**

Some people living with dementia may lose weight unintentionally for a variety of reasons including the following:

- **Poor appetite** — mood changes can affect a person’s feeling towards food and some may no longer enjoy the food they usually eat. Low mood is also common when someone becomes aware they have dementia, and this can sometimes lead to a loss of appetite.

- **Chewing and swallowing problems** — sore mouth and gums or ill-fitting dentures, can make it difficult to eat. Some people may also struggle to communicate to you that they are experiencing these changes and will simply stop eating as much, as a result of their discomfort. This can lead to weight loss.

- **Changes in food preferences** — as dementia progresses, a person’s likes and dislikes for food may change. This can affect the amount and variety of foods eaten.

- **Difficulties using everyday items** — eating using cutlery or drinking from a glass can become difficult. This can make mealtimes a challenge and take the pleasure out of eating and drinking.

- **Easily distracted** — watching TV, or people passing by may distract from eating and drinking.

- **Increased energy needs** — some people with dementia may become more active or like to walk around a lot. As a result, they will use more energy and could start losing weight if they do not increase the amount they eat.

- **Independent living** — if someone is living alone they may find it challenging to prepare food or may forget to eat the food they have, especially if it is not visible and readily accessible.

To check if this weight loss could affect the health of the person you care for go to: www.malnutritionselfscreening.org

If you do not have access to a computer or want to discuss the results of the screening, please ask the GP or nurse who cares for the person with Dementia. If they feel it is appropriate, they may refer you to a Registered Dietitian for more advice.

**Weight gain**

Alternatively, some people living with dementia may gain excess weight for a variety of reasons including the following:

- **Changes in food preferences** — some people prefer high calorie, sugary foods, which may cause weight gain. Some people may develop a sweet tooth.

- **Memory loss** — people with dementia may forget they have already eaten and therefore duplicate meals or snacks.

- **Grazing** — if food is visible and available some people might graze throughout the day without being able to keep track of what they have already eaten, e.g. boxes of chocolates, biscuits, bowls of fruit.

- **Boredom and stress** — if people are going through periods of boredom, stress or loneliness, they may comfort eat.

- **Reduced activity** — some people become less active.
Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health. This includes eating foods from all of the different food groups, to provide the body with the nutrients it needs. If you are involved in preparing meals for someone with dementia, the following food group guide may be useful.

The Eatwell guide shows the 5 food groups that provide the essential nutrition for health and the proportions that should be in our diet. You may need to adjust the proportions and consider if the person you are caring for is overweight, underweight or having difficulties eating specific foods.
Tips to encourage eating

Poor appetite
There are many ways to stimulate a person’s appetite and the following hints and tips can help encourage a person’s interest in food:

- Be flexible with mealtimes and make the most of ‘good eating times’ — different people will have more of an appetite on some days, or at certain times of the day, whether this is breakfast or teatime. Make the most of good days, e.g. offering seconds or extra snacks.
- Offer food and drinks “little and often”.
- Offer small portions of food, more frequently throughout the day.
- Try not to overload the plate with too much food and have a gap between the main meal and dessert.
- Make meals look appetising and eye-catching by including different colours, such as a bowl of chopped fruit or mixed vegetables.

Difficulties using cutlery

- Cut up meals into pieces that can be eaten with a spoon to enable people to remain independent when eating.
- Make finger foods, e.g. small sandwiches, crackers with soft cheese or orange segments. These are ideal for people who have difficulty using cutlery or for those who are restless and like to walk around at mealtimes.
- Adaptive cutlery, plate guards and anti-spill mugs may help.

Changes in food and taste preferences
As dementia progresses, a person’s likes and dislikes may change. Some people may start to enjoy unusual food combinations, such as mixing sweet and savoury flavours. As a carer, it can be difficult to understand these changes and the following tips can help:

- Add a teaspoon of sugar to the water when cooking vegetables, or to savoury sauces.
- Honey, dried fruit or chocolate spread can be added to savoury and sweet foods, such as porridge, casseroles, omelette or pancakes.
- Serve sweet sauces (e.g. apple or plum sauce, ketchup, cranberry jelly) with a main meal.
- Try flavouring new dishes with herbs and spices.
- After roasting vegetables such as carrots and parsnips, stir in honey or maple syrup.
- Include foods that are familiar to the person, but also offer new foods as tastes can change.

Tips for gaining weight or improving nutritional intake
Some people may struggle to eat enough for a variety of reasons and this can lead to weight loss:

- Offer small, frequent meals and snacks every 2-3 hours.
- Encourage the intake of foods high in calories and protein, e.g. meat, fish, eggs and full fat dairy products (milk, yoghurt and cheese).
- Add extra calories by adding butter, grated cheese, cream or oil to vegetables, mash, soups, sauces, or by frying instead of grilling.
- Offering snacks such as biscuits, cakes, chocolate, crisps or crackers may be useful.
- Avoid too much fluid with meals as this can be filling. Instead have drinks after meals.
- Offer nourishing drinks containing full fat milk, e.g. milky coffee, hot chocolate or milk shakes between meals. Complan, Aymes or Meritene drinks can be obtained from supermarkets or chemists.
Tips for losing weight and eating a balanced diet

A small amount of weight gain is acceptable. If weight gain is causing difficulties with activities of daily living (e.g. walking or dressing) please ask the GP or nurse who cares for the person with Dementia for advice. They may refer you to a Registered Dietitian.

- Encourage at least 6-8 cups of low calorie fluids throughout the day. Try tea or coffee without sugar, water or sugar free squash.
- Replace high fat and high sugar foods with high fibre starchy options, vegetables or fruit, e.g. swap a full English breakfast for a grilled bacon sandwich on granary bread.
- Everything in moderation. There is no need to cut out any food group, as long as you control portions. Try using a smaller plate.
- Keep high calorie foods out of sight and provide healthy snacks, e.g. whole grain crackers, pieces of cut up fruit and vegetables or low calorie yoghurt.
- Encourage the person you care for to do activities they enjoy.

Chewing and swallowing problems

It is important to speak to the GP of the person you care for if you are concerned about these problems. The GP may refer them to a Speech and Language Therapist, who can assess the chewing and swallowing difficulties and provide help with managing any difficulties.

Good oral care on a daily basis is important.

Regular check ups with a dentist may identify problems early, such as ill fitting dentures or pain.

Getting help with meals

There are companies who deliver ready-made meals to people living at home who have difficulty preparing their own food. They offer a range of meals including soft, mini and high energy meals for a smaller appetite.

Oakhouse Foods Tel: 0333 772 0288 Website: https://www.oakhousefoods.co.uk/
Wiltshire Farm Foods Tel: 0800 077 3100 Website: https://www.wiltshirefarmfoods.com/
Warwickshire County Council in partnership with Apetito deliver Meals-on-Wheels across Warwickshire. Hot or frozen meals can be provided. To sign up for the service, call Apetito on 0800 090 3625.

Local day centres or lunch clubs can offer social contact, as well as a nutritious meal.

Ordering food and drink online and having home deliveries are an option for those who have difficulty getting out and about and can save time for carers.
Hydration

Being dehydrated can increase confusion and increase the risk of getting urine infections.

Remember:
- Use the “wee” chart below to identify possible dehydration.
- Aim to drink at least 6-8 cups of fluid a day. All fluids count, e.g. water, tea, coffee, squash and milk.
- Some foods also have a high fluid content, e.g. yoghurt, porridge, jelly, milky puddings, soup, fruit and vegetables.

![Wee Chart]

Looking after yourself

If you are busy caring for someone else, you may forget to look after yourself. It is important that you keep as fit and well as possible, to prevent yourself from becoming ill or finding caring too difficult.
- Take time to eat and drink properly.
- Try to find the time to go for a walk or do an activity that you enjoy.
- Get some help with the cleaning or gardening if you can.
- Respite care may be available to enable you to take time for yourself.
- Join a dementia support group or dementia café. This gives an opportunity to provide support and share ideas.

People who can help?

Contact Warwickshire County Council adult social care for more advice on services and support you can access (01926 410410) or www.dementia.warwickshire.gov.uk. Age UK care navigators and the Alzheimer’s Society can also help.

What next?

If you want more information about any of the issues in this leaflet please go to the South Warwickshire NHS Trust web site www.swft.nhs.uk.

If you have tried the suggestions here and are still experiencing problems, you can ask a GP to refer you to a Registered Dietitian.
Equality Statement

At South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust we are fully committed to equality and diversity, both as an employer and as a service provider. We have a policy statement in our Equality Strategy that clearly outlines our commitment to equality for service users, patients and staff:

You and your family have the right to be treated fairly and be routinely involved in decisions about your treatment and care. You can expect to be treated with dignity and respect. You will not be discriminated against on any grounds including age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.

You have a responsibility to treat other service users, patients and our staff with dignity and respect.

Our information for patients can also be made available in other languages, Braille, audio tape, disc or in large print.

PALS

We offer a Patient Advice Liaison Service (PALS). This is a confidential service for families to help with any questions or concerns about local health services. You can contact the service by the direct telephone line on 01926 600 054 by email: Pals@swft.nhs.uk or by calling in person to the PALS Office which is located in the Lakin Road Entrance to the hospital.

If you have any queries about your diet, please contact us:

Dietetic Department
George Eliot Hospital Nuneaton
Tel 024 7686 5098
Dietetic Department
Warwick Hospital Warwick
Tel: 01926 495321 Ext 4258

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