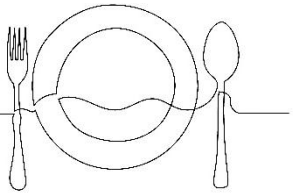
Dementia and Swallowing



Information for families and carers

Why is swallowing important?

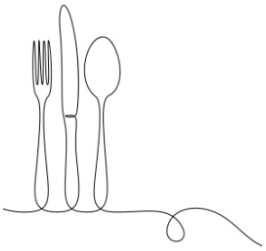
Difficulty swallowing can increase the risk of:

- Dehydration (not drinking enough)
- Malnutrition (not eating enough)
- Choking
- Aspiration pneumonia – a lung infection that can happen when food, drink or saliva enters the airway instead of the stomach, and carried bacteria with it.
- Reduced quality of life because the social side of eating and drinking with others becomes harder.

Common changes you may notice

A person with dementia may:

- Not recognise the food in front of them.
- Forget how to use a knife and fork.
- Forget to open their mouth when food is offered.
- Have difficulty chewing or swallowing.
- Take much longer to finish meals.
- Hold food in their mouth without swallowing.
- Cough or choke during meals.
- Have difficulty judging whether food or drinks are too hot.
- Have changes to taste, smell and appetite.



A speech pathologist can assess swallowing. They can help find ways to make eating and drinking safe and enjoyable, while helping the person stay as independent as possible.

Before eating make sure the person is:

- Awake and alert. If the person is very sleepy or keeps falling asleep during the meal, stop and try again later.
- Sitting upright in a chair or well supported in bed.
- Comfortable.
- Able to smell the food being cooked if possible, to alert the brain centres to the act of eating.

During meals

- Allow plenty of time.
- Keep the eating area quiet and free from distractions, such as the television.
- Be flexible. Appetite, food preferences, and ability to feed themselves may change from day to day.
- Encourage the person to feed themselves for as long as they are able.
- Follow the recommendations from allied health professionals, if there are any

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While helping with meals you can:

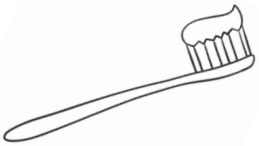


- Talk about the food and describe its taste, smell, or texture.
- Offer one meal option at a time, avoiding too much choice.
- Gently guide the person's hand if they need help using cutlery.
- Offer finger foods if using cutlery is difficult.
- Offer small mouthfuls.
- Wait until each mouthful has been swallowed before offering the next one.
- Go at the person's pace.
- Be careful with hot food and hot drinks.

If the person coughs or chokes, stop giving food or drinks, and allow them time to recover before continuing.

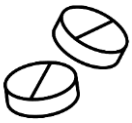
Oral Hygiene

One of the most effective ways to keep someone safe while eating and drinking is to make sure their oral hygiene is as good as possible.



- Support the person to clean their mouth **at least twice a day** using a toothbrush and toothpaste.
- **Oral 7** is recommended as it is mild in flavour, does not foam, and is designed to keep the mouth clean and moist.
- You can read more about this in our handout **Oral Health.**

Medications

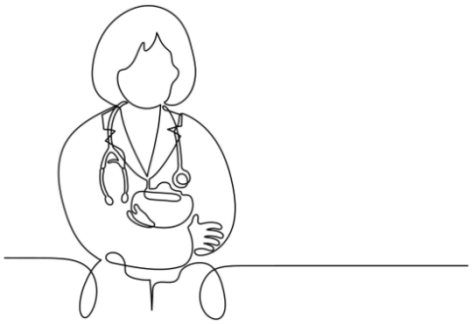


- **Gloup** is a recommended medication lubricant.
- Give one tablet at a time.
- Always check the tablet has not been pocketed in the mouth, or spat out again.

It may be helpful to discuss liquid alternatives with your pharmacy. Never crush or cut medications without asking the pharmacist or doctor first.

When to seek advice

Contact your speech pathologist, doctor or nurse if the person:



- Coughs or chokes regularly during meals.
- Has a wet or gurgly voice after eating or drinking.
- Frequently holds food in their mouth.
- Takes much longer than usual to finish meals.
- Avoids eating or drinking.
- Has repeated chest infections.
- Is losing weight or shows signs of dehydration.
- Can't swallow their tablets.

A speech pathologist can reassess swallowing and recommend strategies if swallowing changes over time.