

12 Tips for Caregivers on Managing Mealtimes

Many older persons with serious chronic health problems have difficulties with eating. The following tips, published in 2007 by LightBridge Healthcare Research, Inc. (www.LightBridgeHealthcare.com), provide helps for caregivers to make mealtimes more positive and successful for those elderly individuals.

1. Encouragement can be a key element to a successful meal. Sit close and smile to get her attention. Give necessary directions in simple phrases to guide her to eat and drink at meals.
2. Provide a comfortable atmosphere by checking room temperature, providing good lighting, and using comfortable chairs at the table. Encourage the person you are assisting to toilet before meals to increase their comfort, which will also increase appetite.
3. Small frequent meals can sometimes improve nutrition problems due to nausea from medications or acid reflux. Five or six smaller meals can also contribute to an overall greater intake of needed protein, calories, and fluids.
4. To help prevent constipation, provide a diet with plenty of fiber, including whole grains, vegetables, nuts, and fruit.
5. Encourage drinking at least six to eight glasses of water, but remember that some persons with Alzheimer's disease may need prompting, cueing, and/or encouragement to do this. (If a person is reluctant to drink water, offer fluid in other forms, or add a drop of ginger or a squeeze of lemon or lime to the water for flavoring.)
6. Try using a very simple table presentation with contrasting colors. Plain tablecloths and dishes may help in limiting distractions and promote concentration on eating. Select plates with rims can help with scooping food. Special utensils that provide a better grip may improve coordination and support independence.
7. You remove clutter from the table, play quiet, soothing music, and reduce noise and traffic distractions to reduce stress during mealtime.
8. To reduce the possibility of dental problems, encourage tooth brushing and/or at least "swishing" after every meal or snack. Oral care after the last snack before bedtime is particularly important, because the food in the mouth has more time to decay and form bacteria.
9. Physical exercise is widely beneficial. Exercise will improve appetite and digestion, intestinal motility, muscle tone and joint flexibility. Even exercising from a seated position in a chair can serve to increase the heart rate, deepen respirations and contribute to an overall sense of well being.
10. Spending quality time with a person with dementia can have many benefits, especially at mealtime. Reminisce about food, favorite restaurants, flowers, gardens or any other joyful topic.
11. Try stimulating the taste buds by adding new flavors to the food such as different spices or sprinkling sugar or artificial sweetener onto the food.
12. Sometimes a poor appetite and/or weight loss can signify a medical issue such as a vitamin deficiency, cancer, or digestive system disease. If the problem persists, go see a physician.