



Alzheimer's Forget Me Not Appeal Week

This week is Alzheimer's "Forget Me Not" appeal week. People with Alzheimer's face a number of nutritional issues.

Problems with eating are common in dementia especially in the middle or late stages of dementia. This can pose a number of challenges for the person caring for them.

In the early stages the person may lose weight if they forget to eat or forget what to eat. They may also face problems such as being uncertain or fearful of going to the shops, so access to food may be a problem. Sometimes a person with dementia will gain weight as they have forgotten that they have eaten, therefore they eat more over the day.

As the disease progresses the nutrition problems may become more challenging – as well as forgetting to eat the person with dementia may refuse to open his or her mouth, spit foods out, be uncertain how to use cutlery, develop chewing problems, push food away, or feel paranoid about the foods being offered. In some cases the person will find it difficult to sit still, choosing instead to pace, and encouraging the person to sit down for a meal can be difficult in this situation.

For the carer it can be very frustrating trying to deal with these issues.

At all stages of dementia it is important to maintain a routine and to try to keep mealtime distractions to a minimum. The environment should be calm and light. Avoid busy patterns on tablecloths and plates. Try playing some quiet calm music in the background.

Studies indicate that people will eat more if they are in the company of others so when possible share a meal with the person instead of feeding them on their own.

Try not to hurry mealtimes – it can take longer for the person with dementia to eat. Gentle encouragement may be needed to "remind" the person how to feed themselves, this may need to be done in stages – such as 'pick up your fork', 'put some meat on your fork', and 'place your fork in your mouth'.

Try to include their favourite foods and drinks. Using familiar foods can be important and trying not to have too many options at one time is also beneficial.

Often as the disease progresses weight loss can be an issue. Aiming for three small meals and snacks in between is important.

Finger foods can be very useful if the person will only sit for a short period of time or if they are not coping well with cutlery. Finger foods can include scones, muffins, small sandwiches, cut up raw fruit, slices of cheese or cold meat, cheese on toast,

hard boiled eggs. Remember to ensure that food is not left sitting out for long periods of time, especially in the summer months.

The addition of extra calories and protein to staple food options can be a good way to increase energy intakes without increasing the volume of food a person has to eat. In this case the "normal" nutrition guidelines go out the door. For extra calories try adding cream, margarine, oil, mayonnaise, and sour cream to standard foods items such as breakfast cereals, vegetables, soup, and sandwiches. Use liberal amounts of jam, honey or syrups on breads, cereals and baked products.

Protein can be added in the form of cheese to mashed vegetables or scrambled eggs. Use full cream milk, custards and yoghurt. Skim milk powder can be added to milk, soups and milk puddings. Add rice, pasta, dried beans or lentils to soups.

Using some commercial products such as "Complan", "Sustagen", "Up and Go" can also be useful. However these should be used as a meal supplement not a meal replacement. They are best served in between meals rather than at meal times.

As well as food it is important to remember the importance of fluids. A poor fluid intake can lead to increased levels of confusion and agitation. A good goal is to aim for eight cups of fluid over the day – this includes all fluids such as milk on breakfast cereals, tea, and coffee.

If you are a caregiver looking after a person with dementia then don't forget to look after yourself as well. Your diet is just as important as that of the person you are caring for.

Fiona Boyle is a registered dietitian and nutritionist. She runs a private practice and gives individual nutrition advice to people to meet their health needs and personal goals. Contact Fiona on 574 7999 or www.foodsolutions.net.nz