Dementia: What to Expect — Eating and Drinking

What is happening

Changes in eating and drinking are a natural and expected part of advanced dementia.

As dementia progresses, patients often:

- Eat less
- Drink less
- Lose interest in food
- Eventually stop eating and drinking altogether

These changes are among the most emotionally difficult experiences for caregivers and families.

Why eating and drinking change

In advanced dementia:

- The brain gradually loses the ability to coordinate eating and swallowing
- The body becomes weaker and needs less food and fluid
- The digestive system begins to slow down

Loss of appetite and reduced intake are part of the natural progression of the illness.

What you may see

- Eating only small amounts
- Holding food in the mouth
- Difficulty swallowing
- Coughing with eating or drinking
- Sleeping more and eating less
- Weight loss
- Refusing food or fluids

These changes usually occur gradually over time.

Important understanding

Families naturally worry that their loved one may:

- Feel hungry

- Feel thirsty
- Suffer from not eating or drinking

Current medical understanding suggests that in the final stages of dementia:

- Reduced intake is part of the body's natural shutting-down process
- Lack of food and fluids at this stage is generally not believed to cause suffering

The body is often no longer able to process food and fluids normally.

Why forcing food or fluids may increase discomfort

As the body weakens:

- The stomach and intestines slow down
- Swallowing becomes less safe
- The kidneys may handle fluids poorly

Forcing food or fluids may increase the risk of:

- Nausea or vomiting
- Choking or aspiration (food or liquid entering the lungs)
- Swelling or fluid retention
- Increased breathing difficulty

What you can do

- Offer food and fluids gently without pressure
- Allow the patient to guide how much they want
- Focus on comfort rather than nutrition goals
- Keep the mouth clean and moist with regular mouth care

Mouth care often becomes one of the most important comfort measures at this stage.

Emotional support for caregivers

It is very common for caregivers to feel:

- Sadness
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Fear that they are "not doing enough"

These feelings are understandable.

The hospice team can help explain what changes are expected and support families through these decisions and emotions.

When to call hospice

- Swallowing suddenly worsens
- Choking or coughing increases
- New breathing difficulty develops
- Vomiting occurs repeatedly
- You are unsure how to provide food or fluids safely
- You feel overwhelmed or distressed about these changes