

FEEDING YOUR LOVED ONE: TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS

Approximately 85% of people with dementia and chronic illness are cared for exclusively in their own homes, and one major worry for caregivers can be ensuring that their loved one is eating healthfully. Good nutrition is important for managing chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease, preserving stamina and independence, and maintaining a strong immune system that can fend off illnesses. However, special dietary needs, reduced ability to eat independently or recognize hunger, reduced appetite, difficult behaviors, and other issues all can make providing a healthy diet challenging, and malnutrition is a real risk.

Looking for strategies to improve nutrition and reduce stressful mealtimes? The What's on Your Plate? guide from the National Institute on Aging Resources can help with choosing foods and planning meals, and the following ideas may help meals go more smoothly:

FEEDING TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS

- Offer one food at a time. Too much food on a plate can be confusing and overwhelming.
- Eat with your loved one. Model eating behavior and have pleasant conversations during meals. Talk about the smell and enjoyment of each food.
- If chewing or swallowing are a problem, prepare soft, chopped or bite-size like cottage cheese, scrambled eggs, applesauce, etc. Watch for choking hazards like small hard objects (grapes, raw carrot pieces). Make sure dentures are in place and fit well.
- Keep table settings simple to avoid distractions. Don't worry about messy eating.
- Serve finger foods like sandwiches (in quarters), carrot or cheese sticks, fruit slices.
- Optimize appetite for meals by offering opportunities for physical activity and avoid constipation with plenty of fluids and fiber.
- Offer small, frequent meals rather than three large meals.

To find more ideas for feeding people with dementia or to prevent malnutrition in your older loved one, consult your healthcare provider, contact a dietitian, or visit the nutrition resources created by the Alzheimer's Association, the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Need additional assistance? Through grants to states and community organizations, the Administration for Community Living funds several programs that provide support to family caregivers. Find out what's available in your community by contacting the ElderCare Locator online or at 800-677-1116, or by visiting the caregiver resources pages on ACL.gov.