

HELPING FEED A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA



This video in the Home Alone AllianceSM series on special diets focuses on helping feed a person with dementia. This is a common problem for caregivers: Should I let the person try to do it alone? How much should I help? Mealtime should be relaxing, not a source of conflict.

Four techniques are demonstrated: independent feeding, overhand feeding, underhand feeding, and complete feeding. As the nurse in the video notes, the person with dementia and caregiver may use one, two, three, or all four techniques in a single meal depending on the stage of the disease.

People with dementia are able to see better with high contrast, so setting the table with this in mind can help. A white or light-colored plate or bowl on a dark placemat will make it easier for the person to see where the food is and judge the distance. Also, placing things in the usual and customary location may help a person with dementia locate meal items. For example, place the plate in the middle, cup to upper right-hand corner, and silverware on side of the plate. A plate guard—a raised border that helps prevent spills—is an inexpensive and useful accessory.

It is also better, if possible, to have the person eat at the table sitting in a chair instead of in lying in bed. This normalizes the activity and makes the caregiver's role less intrusive. It is also easier to provide feeding assistance when the caregiver can sit beside the person with dementia. Staying with the person through the entire meal will help increase food intake, because keeping the person's attention on the meal and helping with a hand-feeding technique may be required of caregivers.

Here are the basic points about the four techniques:

> **Independent feeding:** The person with dementia is still able to feed himself or herself may need verbal encouragement from the caregiver to eat, or

the caregiver may need to demonstrate eating. The person with dementia will likely try to mimic his or her caregiver. If utensils are a struggle, use “finger foods” such as chopped fruits or sandwich bites, which may be easier for the person to eat independently than food that needs a fork.

- > **Overhand feeding:** In this technique, the caregiver places a hand over the person's hand and gently guides it to the mouth.
- > **Underhand feeding:** When the person with dementia cannot hold the utensils or eat finger foods any longer, the caregiver can use this approach by placing a hand under the hand of the person with dementia. This frees up the first two fingers and thumb for the caregiver to hold the utensil or food item and gives more stability and direction to the movement of hand to mouth.
- > **Complete feeding:** The caregiver holds the fork or spoon and guides it to the person's mouth, taking time to allow the person to swallow the food. Lift the spoon to eye level and watch that the person with dementia makes eye contact with the food before placing in the mouth. This should be done smoothly and without rushing.

Additional Resources

Family Caregiver Alliance has a tip sheet on feeding someone with dementia available at <https://www.caregiver.org/feeding-and-nutrition-dementia>.

The Alzheimer's Association has tips about Daily Care, including a section of Food and Eating, at <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/food-eating>.

People with dementia often have trouble swallowing or may also have low appetite. There are separate videos and resource guides in this series on these two topics that you may find helpful at www.AARP.org/NoLongerAlone.

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