



Gill Hooper
RNutr, Freelance
Registered
Nutritionist,
GH Nutrition

Gill runs an independent food and nutrition consultancy. Her main area of interest is nutrition and dementia. She works with people living with dementia, their carers and healthcare professionals, as well as lecturing and providing nutrition training courses and workshops.



Joanne Holmes
RNutr, Lecturer
in Nutrition,
Bournemouth
University

Joanne's research is focused towards improving food, fluid and the overall meal experience for the older person. She was co-investigator in a Burdett Trust for Nursing funded research project, leading to the production of the workbook referred to in this article.

FOOD-BASED ACTIVITY AND PERSON-CENTRED CARE FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN CARE HOMES

Food, good nutrition and hydration are important in providing care for older people in care homes. Food-based activity can help stimulate an interest in food, enhance health and wellbeing and help prevent malnutrition.

Malnutrition affects 35% of care home residents¹ and, according to the Alzheimer's Society, 70% of care home residents are living with dementia.² Older people, including those living with dementia, are more likely to be at nutritional risk for a number of reasons, such as difficulty chewing and swallowing, reduced mobility and motor skills, social isolation and underlying illness. The person living with dementia may encounter specific challenges such as confusion, poor communication skills and may experience a change in food preference or eating habits.

There are many ways to encourage food and drink intake, from food fortification and oral nutritional supplements to providing finger food and considering the presentation of food and the dining experience. For someone living with dementia, the Dementia Mealtime Assessment Tool (The DMAT) is available, which enables carers to 'assess, and select evidence based interventions and generate a person-centred care plan to support mealtime eating abilities and meal behaviours in people with advancing dementia'.³

PERSON-CENTRED CARE

Person-centred care focuses on the needs of a person and ensures that they are treated with dignity, compassion and respect and that care is personalised, coordinated and enabling.⁴ The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) suggests that person-centred care is about respecting an individual's past, supporting their present and

helping them plan for their future.⁵ In a care home, this involves getting to know individuals, finding out about their personal life story and offering services to help maintain or encourage independence and wellbeing.

ACTIVITY

Activity is a way of engaging in this process. Care UK, one of the leading providers of health and social care in the UK, promotes activity-based care to enable meaningful activity and interests for groups and individuals. They have produced a booklet, *As Easy as ABC*,⁶ which contains 100 hints and tips for activity-based care. These include tips to help maintain independence, health and wellbeing and tips to aid reminiscence. A number of the suggestions involve food-based activity, for example, at breakfast, serving toast in a toast rack with butter and marmalade in small dishes to encourage an individual to prepare it themselves. This may seem a very simple activity, but can present a real sense of achievement, promote independence and autonomy.

Activity can play an important role in encouraging food and drink intake. Following a two-year research project on nutritional care for people living with dementia, researchers from the Ageing and Dementia Research Centre (ADRC) at Bournemouth University have produced a workbook, *Eating and Drinking Well: Supporting People Living with Dementia*.⁷ The workbook aims to develop knowledge and skills around food and hydration for care givers to provide the best care for people living

REFERENCES

For full article references please visit info@networkhealthgroup.co.uk

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with dementia. The information is relevant for older adults in residential care and is an excellent resource for care staff, family and friends. In addition to food and drink availability and the importance of communication and relationships, the workbook includes a section on the importance of activity. This considers how to encourage independence through meaningful activity, the importance of life histories and activity to enhance the appetite and evoke the senses. For further information, the workbook is available online.⁸

MEANINGFUL ACTIVITY

To promote health and mental wellbeing, NICE recommends that 'older people in care homes are offered opportunities during their day to participate in meaningful activity'.⁹ What is meant by meaningful activity? It can be any activity specific to a person's needs, ranging from daily living, including preparing food and eating, hobbies such as gardening, baking or reading and social activities with friends and family. 'All types of meaningful activity can promote a sense of independence and wellbeing which can consequently positively impact on appetite.'⁷

Choosing food and drink, meal preparation and spending time in a kitchen, will be a familiar activity for many people and part of a daily routine. Involving residents in menu planning, or holding a menu tasting event, can increase an interest in food and drink and help them feel valued. Offering the opportunity to take part in domestic activities, and the mealtime process in particular, are perfect examples of meaningful activity. Tasks such as helping to peel vegetables for dinner, setting the table, or clearing dishes

and helping to wash up, can give someone a sense of purpose and value and increase confidence, in turn promoting an interest in food and mealtimes. Creating a separate kitchen area for residents to prepare their own drinks and simple snacks, such as a sandwich, or enabling them to choose a piece of cake, or fruit, can have massive benefits. Being able to make a choice can boost self-esteem and help someone maintain important skills; spooning coffee into a cup may seem a very simple task, but provides a sense of independence. It is important of course to know your residents and consider their safety in the kitchen and carry out suitable risk assessments.

LIFE STORY

Finding out about someone's personal life story is essential in providing person-centred care and developing appropriate activity. Life story work and reminiscence are especially important for engaging with someone living with dementia. All staff working within a care home, as well as family and friends, can be involved with this. It may be that a resident was a keen gardener in the past and grew their own vegetables. Perhaps an area of a care home garden can be adapted to include raised vegetable beds and encourage

interested residents to grow vegetables and pick them for use in the kitchen. Or maybe another resident enjoyed baking and can help to stir a cake mix or knead bread dough, the satisfaction of making something and the smell of baking can also help stimulate appetite.

Memories of past events are often connected with food, such as street parties to celebrate the Queen's coronation, war time rationing, childhood birthdays and family weddings, or it may just be a favourite recipe that reminds you of a particular person or occasion. Conversation around food and such events is in itself an important activity, but can encourage an interest in mealtimes. Why not consider putting together a cookery book of favourite recipes, creating a wonderful record for families to keep and providing the opportunity for someone to share their life story and experience? With reminiscence in mind, the Dairy Council have produced a set of four nostalgic postcards, with the tagline, 'getting thin and frail doesn't have to be a normal part of ageing', to promote the importance of eating and drinking enough to maintain health. The postcards accompany a booklet on how to identify malnutrition in older adults and steps that can be taken to overcome it.¹⁰

ACTIVITY TO STIMULATE APPETITE

Activity itself can help stimulate appetite, whether it's physical activity, preparation for a meal, or specific events related to food. Themed events are a great way to encourage interaction and create a sense of wellbeing. The options can be as endless as your imagination, strawberries and cream during Wimbledon fortnight, fish and chip suppers, afternoon tea dances, or international days. Icing cupcakes and biscuits, preparing fruit salad, making sandwiches and decorating pizzas are all activities that can stimulate an interest in food. Activity can take place away from the care home setting. Garden centres are a great place to visit with so much to see and there's usually a coffee shop or restaurant attached, or tea rooms serving afternoon tea in vintage china crockery. How about themed food tasting sessions? This presents the opportunity for activities which

can prompt conversations about food and memories, such as, sampling different varieties of cheese, exotic fruit, cakes or tea.

ACTIVITY AND OUR SENSES

Finally, activity can be used to evoke the senses.⁷ As we age, our senses deteriorate and this is intensified for someone living with dementia. Changes in taste, smell and sight particularly impact our enjoyment of food. Our number of taste buds decrease with age, we produce less saliva and the ability to distinguish salty, sour and bitter foods is reduced. The enjoyment of sweet foods, however, remains the same or can increase, as is often the case with dementia. Adding natural flavour enhancers, such as tomatoes, parmesan, mushrooms, herbs and spices to food, can help stimulate the senses and appetite at mealtimes.

Research from ADRC at Bournemouth University, published in BMC Geriatrics, found that, 'the use of aromas within the care home was acknowledged as an important route in building up anticipation of the meal and stimulating the senses'.¹¹ This included aromas created from cooked breakfast and baking, but also artificial aromas such as coffee and fresh bread. The sense of smell is linked with memory and aromas can be used to evoke specific memories, such as roast dinner on a Sunday, fish and chips at the seaside, or tomatoes growing in a greenhouse.

Deterioration in sight is common as we age and can impact on our perception of food. Ensuring that food looks attractive to eat is essential, it is often said that we eat with our eyes, so food should be colourful and well presented in order to stimulate appetite.

SUMMARY

Activity based around food has an important role in stimulating an interest in food for older people within a care home setting and can enhance the health and wellbeing of residents. This in turn can help reduce the risk of malnutrition. In providing person-centred care and appropriate activity, it is essential to know the needs, abilities and experience of each person to support them and encourage independence and wellbeing.