

It can be a big challenge to ensure people living with dementia are able to eat enough food and drink adequate fluids to maintain their nutritional health. With the loss of clear thinking that comes with dementia, many seemingly easy and everyday behaviours become difficult and mealtime problems are often experienced. This can make maintaining a healthy weight and nutrition status challenging. There is however good evidence that for those living with dementia, their food intake can increase significantly with the introduction of **finger foods**.

Consequences of malnutrition:

- **Loss of muscle mass** which can further increase the loss of functional ability and lead to greater dependence on assistance for daily activities.
- **Decreased immune function** and higher risk of infections.
- **Poorer wound healing** and increased risk of pressure sores.
- **Fatigue, apathy and depression.**

Finger foods help to:

- Reinforce the motion of self-feeding to promote **independent eating** for longer.
- Provide more **acceptable and dignified options** to eat with your fingers.
- Give people the **freedom** to choose their own food from a plate.
- Provide an opportunity for **confidence** in one's own **decision making** to return.
- Provide the chance to acknowledge and use what is still known, to **recoup old learning**.

Nourishing finger food ideas include:

Breakfast

- Oat and bran mini muffins
- Potato cakes
- Mini frittatas
- Sweet and savoury pikelets
- French Toast triangles
- Chopped fruit
- Yoghurt cubes (moulded)*
- Toast soldiers

Main meals

- Themed lunches e.g. Ploughman's lunch, Greek salad, Italian antipasto
- Finger sandwiches
- Fish cakes/balls, meatballs or chicken balls
- Homemade sausage rolls or mini sushi
- Meatloaf or chicken tenders
- Mini quiches/frittatas or zucchini slice
- Steamed vegetable sticks
- Potato wedges or baked sweet potato sticks

Mid meals

- Chopped fruit
- Chopped vegetable sticks (raw or steamed)
- Yoghurt cubes* or tub of yoghurt
- Cakes, slices, biscuits or mini muffins
- Cheese and crackers or cheese cubes
- Finger sandwiches

*Made using thickener and set in a tray before slicing.

TIP

Beverages served in tetra packs may be easier for some people with dementia to drink, particularly for those who wander.

Examples include milk, flavoured milk, fruit juice or nutritional supplements.

Finger foods should be attractive to the eye, smell good, feel good and look good.



Tips for mealtimes:

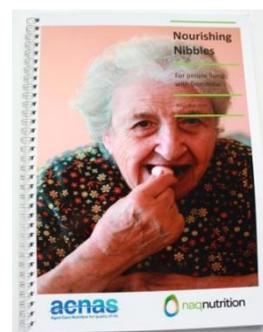
- **Routine:** Offer meals at regular times each day.
- **Environment:**
 - Make meal times simple, relaxed and calm.
 - Limit distractions e.g. turn off the television.
 - Plain tablecloths may be less distracting than patterned ones.
 - Ensure that food, plate and tablecloth are easily distinguishable.
 - Reduce non-food items on the table.
- **Limit confusion:**
 - Present only the cutlery for one course at a time.
 - Remove any plate covers as memory loss may make it difficult for individuals to find the meal.
- **Feeding:**
 - Allow enough time for a meal and be patient – assisting a person can take 45 minutes to an hour.
 - Provide verbal cues, reminding the person to chew and swallow if necessary.
 - Encourage the person to feed themselves for as long as possible to encourage independence.
 - Provide physical assistance by placing the utensil in their hand and then giving a verbal cue.
 - If possible, demonstrate what you would like the person you are caring for to do by eating with them so they can mirror you.



Finger food resources:

In 2015, NAQ Nutrition published **'Nourishing Nibbles' for people living with dementia**, a cookbook developed to provide inspiration for carers and cooks preparing finger food meals and snacks. Nutritional information included.

'Nourishing Nibbles' can be purchased through NAQ Nutrition. Call (07) 3257 4349 to order your copy.



***Note:** The advice provided in this fact sheet is general in nature. A finger food diet may not be suitable for some people requiring a Texture Modified diet.

Please consult an Accredited Practising Dietitian or Speech Pathologist for more advice.

Check out our other fact sheets:

- Nourishing drinks – High Protein, High Energy
- Loss of appetite
- Food fortification
- Increasing fluid intake in the elderly

Call **(07) 3257 4393** to learn more about our **Feeding Supplements Service** or to order a copy of **Nourishing Nibbles**.