

Helping someone eat: Overview

A person who is getting care at home may need help with eating. When helping your loved one eat, be patient and give the person plenty of time. Let the person do as much on their own as possible, as this can help them feel more independent when having meals.

You can help by encouraging the person to choose healthy foods. If your loved one has had a stroke or has swallowing problems, dental problems, or problems with thinking or memory, you may have to provide extra help with eating and getting enough nutrition. If the person has trouble swallowing, then your doctor, a certified dietitian, or a speech therapist can give you specific instructions to help with eating.

Meals can be a great way to spend time together and talk. Eat with your loved one if you can. You may want to play soft music or have your mobile phone or the TV turned off to create a pleasant mood during the meal.

What can you do to encourage a good appetite?

The person you're caring for may have a low appetite or need some encouragement to eat regularly. Try to offer food more often, including healthy snacks, and ask what foods the person you're caring for likes best. Offer those foods when you can.

Serving meals one food at a time can also help encourage a person to eat. Try to prepare a variety of foods that look and smell good by using different flavours and colours.

How can you help prepare for a meal?

Before the meal, there may be some things you can do ahead of time that will make it easier for your loved one to eat. For example, if they have trouble with grip, provide large-handled forks, spoons, knives, and cups that are easy to hold. Use mats and plates that won't slip. And if preparing to eat takes a long time, be sure to keep the food warm.

You may need to prepare food that's easier to chew and swallow. Here are a few things to try:

- Cut or shred the food into small pieces before serving.
- Use canned or cooked fruits and vegetables that are soft.

- Blend or puree the food to make it easier to eat.
- Prepare "finger foods" that can be easily picked up and chewed.

How can you help during a meal?

When you help someone eat, it helps to let them know how you plan to help throughout the meal. If the person has trouble hearing or understanding, use gestures to help you communicate. Make sure that you position yourself so that you're in front of the person and able to make eye contact. Don't stand over the person as it could make them feel uncomfortable.

Here are some other things to remember:

- Be sure the person is sitting up. If the person is eating in bed, prop him or her up to a raised position. For example, raise the person up to a 30-degree angle, which is about the height of two firm pillows. Keep the person raised at this angle for at least 1 hour after eating. This will help to prevent choking.
- Be aware of the temperature of your loved one's food. Some people may not be able to sense temperature very well, so make sure the food is not too hot.
- Use a napkin on the person's lap or under the chin.

For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information call Health Link at 811.

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