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Home Dining Checklist for Memory Loss

In the hustle and bustle of everyday life, enjoying a meal together as a family gives family members opportunities to spend quality time together. But if you're caring for a loved one with memory loss, and depending on the stage of memory loss they're in, mealtime might seem challenging. If you are reading this checklist, chances are you are asking yourself how you can make mealtime an engaging, positive, and enjoyable experience again.

Making Mealtime Easier

Memory loss is frequently accompanied by [changes to appetite and eating habits](#).¹ You have noticed a loss of appetite, forgetfulness, or that your loved one is easily distracted. Maybe changes are less subtle than that, and you've noticed your parent or loved one having difficulty chewing and swallowing.

Perhaps your dad used to be a hearty eater, but now he says nothing tastes "right." Or maybe your mom enjoyed a delicious dinner at 6 o'clock but at 7 she says she's hungry and ready for dinner.

It's easy to get discouraged when your loved one gets distracted while eating or when a spoon meets pursed lips. Fortunately, there are many ways family caregivers can make mealtime easier.

Using the Home Dining Checklist

Teepa Snow, a [leading Alzheimer's and dementia expert](#)² in the senior living industry, says that it's up to caregivers to identify what aspects of the mealtime environment triggered a negative reaction and discover what can be done differently to address challenging situations.

This Home Dining Checklist for Memory Loss will help you find tangible

¹ <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/food-eating>

² <https://teepasnow.com/>

solutions for your loved one at mealtimes. Common challenges that are addressed include:

- Loss of appetite
- Problems using cutlery
- Concentration issues
- Difficulty seeing and recognizing food
- Challenges making decisions
- Forgetting having already eaten
- Chewing and swallowing problems
- Dehydration

With a few simple changes to your approach, you can turn mealtime from a chore into a chance to not only support your loved one to eat and drink well but also to connect and improve your relationship.

Loss of Appetite

Think about what you enjoy eating. Do you have a favorite dish? Are there certain flavor profiles or textures that you prefer over others? It's got to look and smell good, too, right?

Often times, those things don't change for a person with memory loss. What does change is their [ability to communicate](#)³ that they don't like the food they have been given or that they're having painful problems with their dentures that make eating uncomfortable. Other common reasons for [decreased appetite](#)⁴ among people with dementia include lack of physical activity,

³ <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/communications>

⁴ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/nutrition-and-seniors-why-your-moms-appetite-may-have-changed>

medication side effects, depression, and decreased sense of smell and taste.

There are many reasons why a person may lose interest in or turn down food and drink. Instead of assuming your loved one doesn't wish to eat, it helps to identify what the difficulties are and make adjustments. Here are some things you can try:

- ❑ Be flexible about food preferences. Try to prepare familiar foods in familiar ways, especially foods that are favorites, and be aware that your loved one may suddenly develop new food preferences or reject foods they liked in the past.
- ❑ Ensure your loved one gets to enjoy physical activity. Encourage simple exercises, such as going for a walk, practicing tai chi, or washing dishes. Use this [Physical Activity Planner for Memory Loss](https://info.highgateseniorliving.com/physical-activity-planner-for-memory-loss-download)⁵ to learn how to help increase their physical activity.
- ❑ Make food look and smell appealing. Use different tastes, colors, and fragrances. The aroma of cooking can help stimulate their appetite. Spritzing [essential oils](https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/does-holistic-healthcare-really-make-a-difference),⁶ such as peppermint and citrus, on warm washcloths for your loved one to use to wash their hands before mealtime can also help increase their appetite.
- ❑ Check the food temperature. Your loved one might not be able to tell you if something is too hot or too cold to eat or drink.
- ❑ Check with their doctor to make sure that there are no treatable causes for their loss of appetite, such as depression or medication side effects.
- ❑ Arrange a dental appointment to ensure the health of their gums and teeth and, if applicable, that their dentures fit.

5 <https://info.highgateseniorliving.com/physical-activity-planner-for-memory-loss-download>

6 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/does-holistic-healthcare-really-make-a-difference>

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As memory loss progresses, your loved one may start to struggle with coordination. For example, it may become difficult for them to handle cutlery or pick up a glass. They might also have trouble getting food from the plate to their mouth. Your loved one may try to cover up these losses in their abilities out of embarrassment, or they may become so frustrated they give up.

- ❑ Encourage independence by adapting serving dishes and utensils to make eating easier. For example, you might serve food in a bowl instead of on a plate or cut food into bite-sized pieces so your loved one can use a spoon and avoid the need for a knife.

- ❑ Show, don't tell. For example, hold a spoon and show the person how to eat a bowl of cereal instead of using words.
- ❑ Do with, not to. For example, use the hand-under-hand technique, which is like supportive hand-holding. Your hand is on the bottom supporting your loved one, yet they feel like they're in control because their hand is on top.
- ❑ Don't worry about neatness. Be friendly, not bossy, and let your loved one feed themselves as much as possible. Consider getting plates with suction cups and no-spill glasses and providing a straw.
- ❑ Serve food that can be eaten easily with hands, such as hard-boiled eggs, small sandwiches, egg rolls, and orange segments. Finger foods enable your loved one to eat independently, helping to maintain their dignity and control at mealtimes.
- ❑ Allow your loved one to sit and eat in a place where they feel comfortable, either at a table or perhaps sitting with a tray on their lap on a comfortable chair.

Notes:

Concentration Issues

Have you ever been to a restaurant where the music was loud and the conversations around you were distracting? Maybe the menu was really long and the lighting made it hard to read. The busy waiter keeps stopping by your table, but you're still not ready to order. You eventually make a choice, but it wasn't easy.

Now imagine that you have dementia. For someone with memory loss, a noisy environment with lots of distractions can make it difficult to concentrate on what's in front of them. Here are some things you can do to make mealtime calm and relaxed:

- ☐ Limit distractions. Switch off the television and turn down loud music.
- ☐ Serve meals in quiet surroundings.
- ☐ Keep the table setting simple. Avoid placing items on the table that might distract or confuse your loved one.

Notes:

Difficulty Seeing and Recognizing Food

Dementia affects the parts of the brain that handles visual information coming from the eyes, so your loved one might be experiencing difficulties with their sight and vision perception. Perhaps your loved one doesn't recognize the food you put on the plate in front of them, so they simply sit and stare.

It's important not to assume that they don't want to eat. Here are some things you can do instead:

- ❑ Distinguish food from the plate. For example, rice in a white bowl may be difficult to see because there is poor contrast between the bowl and the rice. Putting the rice in a red bowl will help to ensure the food stands out and contrasts well with the bowl.
- ❑ Avoid patterned dishes, tablecloths, and placemats. It can help to use white plates or bowls with a contrasting color placemat.
- ❑ Always describe the food you are offering.
- ❑ Ensure the area where your loved one eats is bright and well-lit so they can see the food easily.

Notes:

Challenges Making Decisions

Making decisions becomes more challenging as memory loss progresses. If you give your loved one multiple options for food, they may struggle to remember all the options you offered. Serving too many foods at once can also be overwhelming. But that doesn't mean you should eliminate options. Your loved one has a right to make a choice about the food they want to eat.

If decision-making is difficult for your loved one, here are some ways you can assist them:

- ❑ Use picture menus or show your loved one their food options instead of simply calling out a list of options. For example, if you're trying to figure out what they'd prefer to eat, show them two types of breakfast cereal or hold up two tins of soup.
- ❑ Serve only one or two foods at a time. For example, you might serve mashed potatoes followed by meatloaf.
- ❑ Try offering small amounts of a variety of food and observe your loved one's response at mealtimes. This can help to build up information about the food they enjoy.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Your loved one might forget to eat and drink — or they might forget having just eaten a meal and ask for lunch or dinner multiple times a day. If your loved one is frequently asking or searching for food, it can be stressful. Here are some tips for tackling overeating:

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Over time, your loved one may experience difficulties chewing and swallowing. If you notice your loved one is reluctant to eat, they might be in pain or could be worried about choking on the food they're given. They might also struggle to communicate their challenges.

- ❑ Prepare foods so they aren't hard to chew or swallow. Cut them into bite-size pieces, or serve soft foods, such as applesauce, cottage cheese, and eggs.
- ❑ Avoid foods that are difficult to chew thoroughly, like raw carrots.
- ❑ Encourage your loved one to sit up straight with their head slightly forward.

Unfortunately, dehydration may worsen the symptoms of their dementia, increase the risk of urinary tract infections, and exacerbate the risk of constipation, among other things. Here are some tips for increasing your loved one's fluid intake:

- ❑ Leave drinks in a place where they can both reach and see them, such as on a coffee table in the living area.
- ❑ Served flavored and colored water and foods with high water content, such as watermelon, strawberries, oranges, cucumber, soup, and yogurt.
- ❑ Offer your loved one prompts and encouragement to drink.
- ❑ Describe the type of drink you have poured. For example, you might say something like, "This looks like a lovely cold drink for a hot day."
- ❑ Place the glass or cup in their hands and guide it to their mouth to help start the process off if your loved one needs help to initiate the sequence of drinking.

Notes:



This guide is brought to you by Highgate Senior Living, an industry-leading assisted living and memory care provider offering a holistic approach to care. Pioneering change in the senior living industry, Highgate is committed to creating a unique and desirable living option where each resident can live a life of purpose.

Visit our website at www.highgateseniorliving.com to learn more.

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