

# Person-centred food & nutrition

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**Eating well is important, no matter what a person's other health needs may be. The right nutrition helps us to optimise our physical and mental health and maintain our quality of life. Good food is also enjoyable, and it is never too late to start eating well. However, as people get older, this can become a challenge, particularly if they have health conditions such as diabetes or dementia.**

This guide is intended to help you to understand some of the difficulties around eating and drinking as we get older. It also shows how we approach diet and nutrition as part of the person-centred care that we offer throughout our Canford Healthcare residential and nursing homes.



## **It is a simple fact of life that older people are often less hungry, leading to unintentional weight loss and nutritional deficiencies.**

The reasons for this are not always obvious. It can be because our hormones change as we age, so our levels of hunger hormones may be lower, or we have greater numbers of fullness hormones. In addition, some aspects of ageing – the onset of particular conditions, for example – make us lose our sense of taste or smell, so food becomes less appetising. Or a reduced interest in food could be the fault of underlying illness or depression, boredom or apathy.

Loss of appetite can also be caused by certain medications, as can constipation, making it uncomfortable to eat too much.

It can be due to a simple physical issue with teeth or dentures, which makes eating difficult or painful.

Although older adults may need fewer calories to maintain their weight – since they tend to move around and exercise less and carry less muscle – they need just as high (or even higher) levels of some nutrients compared with younger people. This is partly because, as we age, our bodies become less efficient and able to process or absorb nutrients.

So it is important that older people eat plenty of healthy staples such as fruit, vegetables, fish and lean meat to help them fight nutrient deficiencies – without expanding their waistline!



## Staying hydrated

Older people are more prone to dehydration, largely because they do not feel thirsty. Water makes up 60% of the human body so staying hydrated is extremely important at any age as our bodies constantly lose water, mainly through sweat and urine.

The body detects thirst through receptors in the

brain and throughout the body. As we age these may become less able to recognise thirst, while our kidneys (which help the body to conserve water) also lose function. People with dementia, for example, become unable to realise that they are thirsty.

Whatever the reason, it is vital to monitor older people to ensure that they remain sufficiently hydrated.

## The ageing process and bodily changes

As we age, it is normal to lose muscle mass and strength, but the associated muscle weakness can be a factor in poor health, making us more prone to serious injuries such as fractures, even from relatively minor falls.

This is partly due to the nutritional deficiencies we develop via the ageing process or a poor diet – or a combination of the two. Below are some of the main ones:

- **Calcium** – we become less able to absorb calcium which can lead to a vitamin D deficiency, resulting in increased bone loss and a greater likelihood of fractures.
- **Vitamin D** – this is made by the body when our skin is exposed to sunlight, but older people's bodies are less efficient at producing it. If we stay indoors for most of the time, we absorb less sunlight, while ageing skin is thinner and less able to make vitamin D.
- **Vitamin B12** – we become less able to absorb vitamin B12 (needed for making red blood cells and maintaining a healthy brain function) thanks to reduced production of stomach acid. Vegans and vegetarians need to pay particular attention as they are more likely to avoid eggs, fish and dairy – all rich sources of vitamin B12.
- **Iron deficiency** contributes to anaemia, a condition in which the blood does not supply enough oxygen to the body. This can cause unpleasant symptoms such as fatigue, weakness, breathlessness, frequent headaches, loss of appetite and a greater susceptibility to falls, depression and infections.

**If you are looking after someone at home or are considering residential or nursing care for them, you will want to be sure that their diet is healthy and that they continue to enjoy their food.**

It is not easy to judge this for yourself when you visit a home so we would like to help you learn more about our approach to diet and nutrition as part of the person-centred care we offer at all our Canford Healthcare homes.

We believe that our residents' eating experience should be as nourishing, healthy and enjoyable as possible, and that means starting with your personal eating and nutritional requirements.

Just like you and your relatives, our catering staff are part of our Canford family, and they enjoy getting to know you and learning what you most like (and dislike) on your plate.

## **Fresh and nutritious**

We work closely with our chefs and kitchen staff (and our partner **Caterplus** to provide home-prepared meals that are cooked with fresh ingredients, healthy and nutritionally balanced with the right mix of protein, carbohydrates, healthy oils and fats, fruit and vegetables. It goes without saying that our chefs endeavour to make food visually appealing as well.

## Tasty and varied

Because variety is so important, our menus change daily – we make these available in advance to allow residents plenty of time to decide – and we offer a choice at every mealtime. If none of the day's dishes appeal residents can request something else. We can also cater for food allergies or intolerances, taking into account dietary preferences or cultural needs.

Lunch is usually the main meal of the day, with a lighter evening meal, but you can swap them around if you prefer to have your main meal in the evening. If you wish to have some meals in bed (breakfast is a popular choice), that's fine too.

Not everyone feels like eating three full meals a day, so we make sure that healthy and visually appealing snacks in special containers called 'grazeboxes' are readily available in the mornings and afternoons. These tasty savoury and sweet snacks (also available as puréed versions) are popular with residents, especially those who prefer to graze throughout the day (and sometimes the night) to meet their nutritional requirements. Grazebox snacks are available in many of our homes and we will be rolling them out to the rest within the next few months.

With hydration in mind, all our residents are offered unlimited hot and cold drinks, fruit juices and healthy smoothies. These can be served in their rooms or the lounges and, in many of our homes, they can help themselves at a residents' bar or café area.

**As part of our approach to provide meals that are consistent and nutritionally balanced according to each resident's specific dietary needs, we use person-centred portion control.**

This is as much about ensuring a healthy diet as it is about weight maintenance. Elderly people, especially those with dementia, tend to lose weight, and that often means losing muscle mass. People with dementia are often very active, too; they burn a lot of calories and so need a diet high in fat and energy to help them maintain their weight. Sometimes they cannot sit still for long enough to eat a full meal. On the other hand, people who are bed restricted may be at risk from gaining weight.

To help us with this, we use a special, colour-coded range of different-sized utensils called spoodles (a cross between a spoon and a ladle), as well as scoops and tongs. These allow our staff to spoon out the right amount of food for each person, without having to worry about whether it is too much or too little. It also makes it easier to serve food in a visually appealing way – especially important for people with variable or fragile appetites.

The portion sizes for each person are worked out using guidance from a variety of resources including the Food Standards Agency, so that they get the right amount of food to help them gain, lose or maintain their weight.

The spoodles work well for normally textured food but are equally practical for modified food. This includes 'textured' or puréed meals



and we prepare these for people who have chewing or swallowing difficulties.

Such options are really important for people with a range of eating difficulties, as they allow them to eat not just a balanced diet, but an enjoyable one. Someone with a swallowing difficulty might not normally be able to enjoy an ordinary slice of cake, for example, but with modified food, they can.



**As dementia progresses, people often experience physical, emotional and behavioural changes that can make mealtimes, and receiving the right nutritional balance, challenging.**

Even in the early stages, changes in the brain may result in people forgetting to eat or becoming confused mid-meal.

They may also become restless, finding it difficult to sit down for long enough to finish a full meal. Sometimes, a formerly comfortable chair and table may themselves become challenging, the surrounding décor or noise levels may grow uncomfortable or distracting while cutlery may be too difficult to handle.

As dementia progresses, people can have difficulties with chewing or swallowing, also known as dysphagia, and this can affect how they swallow certain types of food or liquid – or even anything at all. There are a number of causes for this, including stroke or head injury, but dysphagia is particularly common in the more advanced stages of dementia.

As well as having implications for weight loss, dysphagia can be dangerous because of the risk of choking. It can also cause repeated chest infections or aspiration pneumonia, as food or liquid 'goes down the wrong way'. The added complication is that communication problems may make it hard for someone to indicate that they are having trouble.

## Managing nutrition for residents with dementia

As well as training our staff in what to do if someone is choking or in difficulty, we make sure that our chefs and catering teams provide tasty meals in formats for people with dementia or dysphagia to eat safely.

We base our menus on the IDDSI guidelines. The IDDSI is the International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative, which is a global project to improve the lives of people living with dysphagia.

We can provide specially modified foods that make it possible for people with swallowing difficulties to still enjoy delicious and appetising meals. There are eight levels of modified food and thickened liquids, and we can select the right level for each resident to reduce the risk of choking.



Textured modified foods come in a range of types, and might involve simply mincing food or providing it in smaller bites so that the food doesn't need to be chewed.

Puréed foods might be 'thin' or 'thick'. Thick puréed foods are of a consistent soft texture while still being solid enough to eat with a fork. They are created with each element of the meal separate from the other so that the different flavours are still distinct.

All meals are measured using spoodles to ensure that the portion size is right for each person. We offer help at mealtimes to people who need it, and encourage those who find it hard to concentrate on their meal to continue eating. Using the right type of food means that people are able to eat more safely, and their levels of nutrition and hydration are improved.

For people who really struggle with full meals, our grazeboxes offer nutritious and appealing snacks throughout the day.





**If you are moving into a residential or nursing home, food and nutrition will become an important aspect of your care plan alongside your medication and other care needs.**

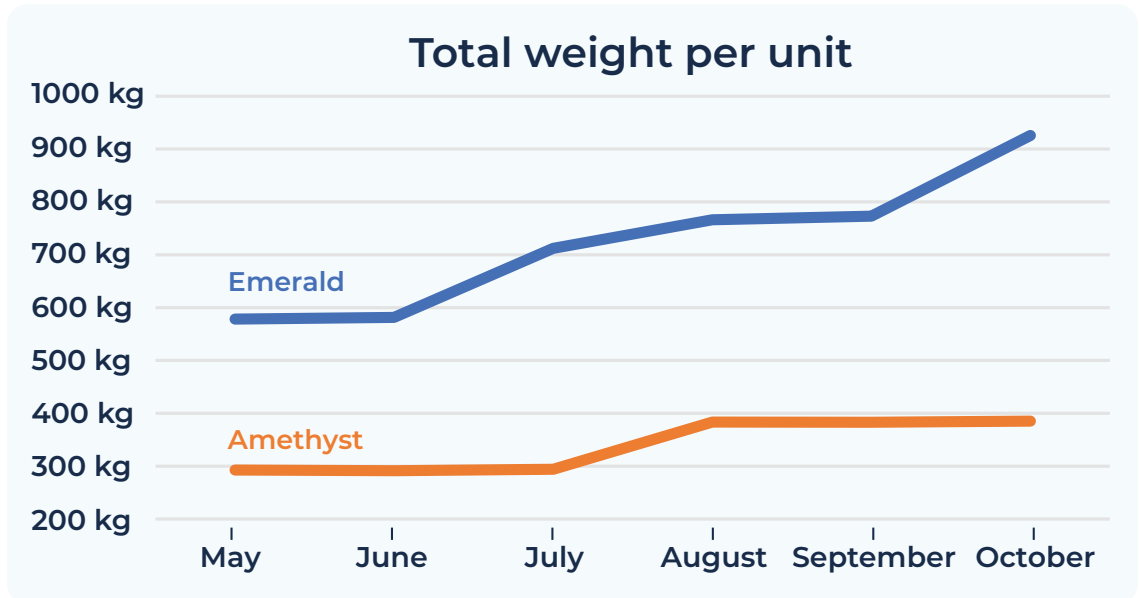
When we put together your care plan, we record all your likes, dislikes and special dietary needs. So it is important to tell us what you like to eat as well as the foods you cannot stand!

We also closely monitor your weight and dietary needs each month, recording any changes on your care plan. The care and catering teams work closely together to ensure that you get the nutrition you need to keep as healthy as possible.

## We trialled person-centred nutrition at our Mayflower Care Home in Kent, so our residents there were the first to try grazeboxes and meals served using spoodles.

We were confident that it would make mealtimes easier for our residents with dementia, but we also found that they were more relaxed and settled, particularly in the evenings, with lower levels of agitation and better sleep patterns.

Many people reacted very positively to the grazebox snacks, and generally people started to gain weight. This has also been the case in other Canford Healthcare homes.



This leaflet is part of a series designed to help people to understand more about some of the health, wellbeing and challenges affecting older people and how these can be managed, particularly within a residential, nursing or respite care setting.

Visit our resource library for our other leaflets:  
[www.canfordhealthcare.co.uk/library](http://www.canfordhealthcare.co.uk/library)

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