

GUIDE · 6 MIN READ

When someone with dementia stops eating

It's one of the most worrying things a family caregiver faces — and one of the most fixable, if you work through the causes in the right order.

Check these first

- Mouth pain — a loose tooth, sore gums, ill-fitting dentures or oral thrush. Look in their mouth.
- Constipation — a very common cause of loss of appetite in older adults. Ask when they last had a bowel movement.
- Medication side effects — especially new ones. Some dementia and antidepressant medications dull appetite.
- Depression — common after diagnosis and very treatable.
- Difficulty using utensils, or not recognizing food as food.
- Loss of smell and taste, which dementia accelerates.
- Overwhelm — a busy table, a loud TV, or too much food on the plate.

Then try these

- Smaller plate, less on it. A plate that looks 'doable' is eaten more often than a fuller one.
- Colored plates — bright red or blue increases food intake in dementia (the contrast helps the food register).
- One thing at a time. Entrée, then vegetables, then dessert — not all together.
- Finger foods if utensils are a struggle: small sandwiches, cheese cubes, grapes, banana slices, hard-boiled eggs.

- Calorie-dense over voluminous: whole milk, butter on everything, cheese, peanut butter, full-fat yogurt.
- Eat with them. Mirroring is powerful — they're more likely to eat if you're eating too.
- Quiet, calm room. Turn off the TV.
- Same time every day. Routine helps the body remember it's hungry.

When to call the doctor

Any sudden change in eating, choking or coughing while eating, weight loss of more than 5% in a month, or refusing fluids for more than a day — same-week PCP appointment. A speech-language pathology (SLP) swallow evaluation is covered by Medicare and worth asking for early.

Track meals and weight in one place

The Care Companion's daily log captures appetite, fluids and weight — and surfaces the trend the doctor needs to see. 7-day free trial.

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General guidance, not medical advice. For urgent eating, drinking or swallowing concerns, call your doctor. In an emergency, call 911.

Free guide from The Care Companion — practical tools for families caring for someone with dementia. More guides at thecarecompanion.com/guides