

NUTRITION AND COGNITIVE CHANGES

Draft for Comment

Aim

To support people experiencing changes to their cognition to eat well and live well, and to be aware of signs and symptoms requiring further support/intervention and where to get help.

The resource will be suitable for:

- Patients living with a condition that may impair cognition.
- Patients experiencing cognitive changes.

Learning Outcomes

The target group will:

- be aware of signs and symptoms that may affect their nutritional status.
- be able to adapt their daily activity to manage issues related to cognition.
- be able to apply practical strategies to maintain their nutritional status e.g. keeping routines, good shopping habits, eating environment, maintaining adequate hydration.
- know how to identify if they need further support and where to go for this.

Request for comments

Please send comments to jenni.henderson@ndr-uk.org by Thursday 30th May:

- Clarity of key messages
- Suitability for purpose
- Length and amount of detail given
- Resource title

Living Well: Nutrition and Cognitive Changes

Introduction

Every day your brain carries out a range of actions and processes that help you to do daily activities, also known as your cognition. This includes how you interpret the world around you, communicate with others, make decisions, learn, and remember new information as well your ability to solve problems.

Common signs and symptoms include:

- **Becoming more forgetful** e.g. forgetting where you have put something, your appointments, or names of people/places or groceries you need to buy.
- **Struggling to make decisions or solve problems** e.g. deciding what you will have for a meal.
- **Forgetting the steps in day-to-day tasks** e.g. when preparing and cooking food.
- **Word finding difficulties.** An example of this is the word apple – you know it is a fruit, it is red or green, has a skin and is sweet, but can't recall what it is called.
- **Feelings of confusion when doing something familiar to you** e.g. when going out to a café or restaurant with friends or family which you go to often.

These changes can happen for several reasons. They can occur after a brain injury or stroke or in conditions such as Dementias, Parkinson's disease or Huntington's disease. Although some small changes are expected as you age, they should not significantly affect your day-to-day life. You may also find that you are experiencing changes in your mood, emotions and behaviour. If you are concerned about your cognition or overall health, speak to your GP surgery or health centre for further advice and support.

This booklet provides practical hints and tips to help you look after your nutritional health and wellbeing if you are experiencing changes to your cognition.

If you are concerned about your nutrition, are eating less for more than a week without a reason, or you are losing a lot of weight without trying, speak to your GP or healthcare professional for further support and advice. If required, they can refer you to a dietitian for further assessment.

Eating well

Eating a healthy balanced daily diet, with 3 regular meals and snacks, can help you maintain a healthy weight and stable energy levels throughout the day. This can reduce the risk of poor health, illness and infection.

Which foods are part of a healthy balanced diet?

1. **Carbohydrates**, such as starchy foods, provide the body with energy and help you to remain active throughout the day. Aim to have some with every meal. Wholemeal or wholewheat varieties are good sources of fibre. Examples include:
 - Potatoes, yam
 - bread, bagels, pitta, wraps, chapati, cream crackers
 - cereals, porridge, wheat biscuits
 - rice, pasta or couscous.
2. **Fruit and vegetables** are good sources of fibre, vitamins and minerals. Aim for a variety and ideally 5 portions a day. This includes fresh, frozen, tinned, dried and juice. Swapping a snack for a piece of fruit, adding dried fruit to cereal, or adding salad to sandwiches can help you reach your 5 a day. One portion is:
 - 1 apple, pear, banana or similar size fruit
 - 2 small fruits, e.g. kiwis, plums, satsumas
 - 1 slice of melon or pineapple
 - 1 small glass of fruit juice or smoothie per day
 - A heaped tablespoon of dried fruit
 - 3 heaped tablespoons of vegetables
 - 2 heaped handfuls of salad.
3. **Protein** is essential to build and repair the body's tissues. Aim to have some protein foods with every meal throughout the day. Examples include:
 - A palm sized piece of lean meat (remove visible fat and skin). Try to eat less red processed meat such as, bacon, ham and sausages
 - 2 eggs
 - 3 heaped tablespoons of beans, peas, pulses
 - A handful of nuts
 - Fish – aim to have twice a week. Fresh, tinned and frozen all count. Oily fish such as salmon, sardines and mackerel, has lots of health benefits and is a source of protein.

4. **Milk, dairy and calcium enriched alternatives** are good sources of calcium and can also provide a source of protein. Aim to have these 3-4 times a day. Examples include:

- A small matchbox size of cheese (30g/1oz)
- 200ml of milk
- A small pot of yoghurt
- 200ml of calcium enriched milk alternative e.g. soya, oat, almond
- 2 tablespoons of cream cheese/3 tablespoons of cottage cheese.

5. **Oils and Spreads** – Choose unsaturated fat options e.g. vegetable spread, olive oil or vegetable oil.

Vitamin D

Many people struggle to get enough vitamin D from dietary sources and sunlight. Therefore, a supplement containing 10 micrograms of vitamin D is often recommended.

Shopping and food preparation strategies

If you find any part of grocery shopping, preparing food, or cooking difficult, there are simple steps you can take to ensure your diet meets your needs.

Grocery shopping

- Write a list of foods and drinks you need and stick this on your fridge or a cupboard door. Add to it as you remember items you need for that week.
 - A 'things to do/things to remember' dry wipe reminder board may be helpful.
 - If you use a smart phone, add your list as a note on your phone or consider using a grocery shopping list app.
- Consider having a standard list of items you need each week and add any additional items you need to the bottom or make a list of all the items you buy on a regular and occasional basis and tick the items you need that week.
- If you use a list when shopping, take a small pen or pencil with you to score off any items you have put in your basket. This way, you are less likely to forget something you need.
- Consider online shopping if going into a shop to buy groceries is difficult or you find it overwhelming. You can create a list and review it, then arrange for this to be delivered to you or pick it up from the shop's collection point.
- If you find it hard to cope with shops when they are busier, some shops have introduced quieter shopping times or will be able to advise when they are less busy.

Preparing food

- Try cooking in bulk and freeze extra portions. Label clear containers with what the food is and the date it was prepared. Enlist the help of friends and family if you are finding any aspect of preparing or cooking food difficult.
- There is nothing wrong with using convenience foods. Fresh, prepared, chilled options, dried, tinned and frozen foods can make life easier.
- Make a checklist of steps needed to prepare foods, or use recipes with clear instructions or pictures for each step, to help remind you how to do this. For example, when preparing vegetables, make a list of:
 - what utensils will you need
 - if you need to wash what you are preparing
 - how to remove the skin
 - what direction you need to cut them
 - what shape they should look like.
- Consider using alternative ways to cook food instead of the hob or oven. Microwaving, using an electric food grill or an air fryer can be easier to use. They also use less energy so can make it cheaper to prepare your meals too.
- Freeze foods in shallow tubs to make them easier to defrost. Soups and sauces can be frozen flat in zip lock bags.

Pre-prepared meals

- You might find it helpful to have some ready prepared meals at home for days you are busy or are finding more challenging. If buying fresh, chilled or frozen ready meals, try to buy options that include protein, starchy carbohydrates and vegetables to give you a good balance.
- There are companies who deliver pre-made meals to your home which you can either cook from the freezer or cupboard. A search online will help you find companies who will deliver in your local area.
- Check out local shops such as deli's, butchers and bakeries to see if they sell fresh, ready to cook meal options.

Eating out

- Arrange a regular lunch or coffee date with friends or family. Eating is always better when you are with other people. This can be a good way of ensuring you have a meal without the need to prepare it. If you are looking to make new friends, check local noticeboards, magazines or social media for lunch or supper clubs in your area.
- If you enjoy and find eating in company helpful, consider arranging an afternoon tea, picnic, buffet style meal or, if the weather allows, a BBQ at home. Many supermarkets have a wonderful selection of ready-made items that can be used.

Store cupboard shopping ideas

It is a good idea to have a store of ready to use, longer life foods. These can be used to make preparing meals easier. They can also be handy if you have any issues getting groceries, for example during bad weather. Dried, vacuum packed, tinned and frozen foods are all good options.

Although these foods have a longer shelf life, you still need to rotate food. Put newer items to the back and bring food bought previously to the front of the cupboard or freezer. Check 'use by' dates on all foods and discard food past this date. Check any advice on packaging about how to store foods and when to use them once opened. Foods that are labelled 'best before' can be eaten after the date, but the quality may be reduced.

The eating environment

The environment where you eat your meals can help or hinder your intake, especially if you are starting to have problems with your concentration or memory. Noisy and busy environments can make it harder to concentrate on the task in hand, whether that be cooking, preparing or eating a meal. A poorly lit room can make it difficult to see what you are doing or what you need to do.

To make the environment helpful for preparing and eating meals, try some of the following suggestions:

- Ensure the environment is well lit, preferably with natural light and few shadows.
- Try to keep the environment as calm as possible e.g. not too many people present.
- Reduce noise e.g. turn off the TV/radio or have some quiet background noise to help you concentrate.
- Ensure you are sat in a comfortable chair in an upright position when eating your meals.
- If eating at the table, make sure you can get your chair close to the table and you can sit upright with your feet touching the floor.
- Try to have some cooking smells in the environment – this can help keep your focus on the fact that it is a mealtime as well as interest in the food you are going to eat.
- When laying the table, make sure it only has the things on it that you need for that meal e.g. cutlery, condiments. This will help reduce distractions.
- Keep mealtimes enjoyable – you may prefer to eat on your own or find eating with loved ones or friends more enjoyable.
- Try to have a routine for meals. This can help you recognise that it is a mealtime.

Technology to support shopping, cooking and mealtimes

There is lots of technology available that can support you to shop, cook and set mealtime reminders. Some examples are listed below, but it is worth considering which will best suit your needs. You may need to trial different ideas to find the best one for you. If your needs change, or you start to experience different difficulties, additional or different support may be required.

- A Memo Minder set – a motion activated reminder that plays pre-recorded messages e.g. check the cooker is switched off before leaving the kitchen.
- A reusable signage sticker book – attach to any surface to show what is in a drawer or behind a closed door.
- A Multi Memo 6-minute Voice Recorder – play back shopping lists or important reminders when out and about.
- Easy to use plug in timers – can be used to ensure household items are not left switched on e.g. a cooker.
- Orientation clock with inbuilt reminder function – can be used to set a reminder that it is a mealtime.
- Reminder clock – program mealtime reminders.
- Digital kitchen timer/talking kitchen timer – set reminders for tasks e.g. cooking.
- SMART speaker – set reminders for mealtimes, to cook or have a drink.
- Apps or reminder functions on SMART phones or SMART watches.

Fluid

The body is made up of about two thirds water. This is needed for all functions in the body including:

- blood flow
- heathy digestion
- regulating body temperature
- maintaining healthy skin
- keeping your mouth moist and joints mobile
- keeping your kidneys healthy.

Aim to have 1.6-2 litres (3 pints) of fluid a day to stay hydrated. The following all count:

- water
- squash
- fizzy drinks
- tea and coffee
- malted milk
- hot chocolate
- cordial
- savoury drinks made with stock cubes and hot water
- fruit juice
- smoothies
- energy drinks
- milkshakes.

Dehydration (a lack of fluid) can lead to:

- constipation
- dizziness
- falls
- confusion
- tiredness
- irritation.

Tips to prevent dehydration

- Find the drinks you enjoy the most.
- Eat high fluid foods, such as jelly, ice lollies, sorbet, ice cream, mousse, soup, terrine and fruit such as melons, grapes, strawberries and berries.
- Flavour water with squash or juice.
- Drink a full glass of fluid when taking medications.
- Drink small amounts regularly.
- Keep drinks within reach.
- Set an alarm to remind you to drink.
- Fill a 1¹/₂ or 2 litre jug/bottle with water in the morning and use this to make all your drinks throughout the day. This can help you keep track of your fluid intake.

Alcohol

- Adults are advised to limit alcohol to no more than 14 units per week.
- A unit of alcohol is a half pint of standard strength beer or lager (3-4%), a small glass of wine (125ml) or a 25ml measure of spirits.

If you enjoy an alcoholic drink, you may also enjoy low-alcohol and alcohol-free options. For example, you could try mixing beer or wine with lemonade to make shandies or spritzers, or have low alcohol/alcohol free beer, wine or cocktails at parties, afternoon events and dinner. Dressing up the drinks with slices of fruits, serving in ice bowls or with straws can add to the fun.

Constipation

Many people can experience constipation. This may be caused by a lack of fibre and fluid in the diet, a lack of exercise, or a side effect of medication. If you have constipation, try increasing the fibre in your diet by including more fruit and vegetables, wholegrain cereals and breads, linseeds, prunes, porridge oats, digestive/oaty biscuits. Speak to your pharmacist for further advice.

Keeping active

Keeping active is an important part of a healthy lifestyle and has many benefits for your physical and emotional wellbeing. It is never too late to incorporate exercise into your daily routine, so even if you are not currently active, you can benefit from starting to include regular physical activity.

Exercise can have many benefits including:

- keeping muscles, bones and joints strong
- helping maintain or improve mobility
- helping with coordination
- improving mood
- reducing stress
- increasing appetite.

All forms of exercise count, and while planned and supervised exercise programs are ideal, it is important to choose something that you enjoy doing. Aim to be active every day, even if it's just light activity.



Adapted from the UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines 2019.

If you are new to exercise or if there are other medical conditions or disabilities that make it difficult for you to exercise, speak to your healthcare professional about what type of exercise might be most suitable for you. They may also have details of local groups or schemes where you can access support on increasing your activity.

Mood and mental health

Your mood and mental health can have a big impact on your food choices, appetite and intake. Feelings of low mood and anxiety may cause you to eat less as you may feel less hungry or nauseous. If you feel unsettled, you may become more active and use up more energy during the day.

In contrast, feeling low in mood or anxious may increase your appetite and make you want to eat more. However, it is likely that the foods that you fancy eating more of (e.g. high fat or sweet foods, processed carbohydrates, alcohol), are not nutritionally balanced and may lead you to experience more food cravings.

Eating an unbalanced diet may contribute to your feelings of low mood or anxiety. Where possible, try to ensure you have plenty of sleep, remain active with purpose and try to eat as balanced diet as possible. Include small and frequent meals and nourishing snacks if you find it difficult to settle for mealtimes or if your appetite has reduced.

Maintaining good oral health

Maintaining good and regular mouth care is important to help you eat well. It can also help you avoid mouth infections which can affect your appetite and eating habits. Good oral health can help you feel comfortable in social settings, for example when eating out and being close to family and friends.

You are probably able to care for your teeth and mouth yourself with perhaps the occasional need for gentle prompting and support from your family or carer. Here are some tips to help you look after your mouth and teeth.

- Brush your teeth using a small headed toothbrush and a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste twice a day for at least 2 minutes each time.
- If you wear dentures, clean these twice a day and after you have eaten with a denture brush to prevent infection. It is best to take your dentures out at bedtime. You may be able to ask your dentist about getting a spare set of dentures or having your name printed on them to reduce the risk of them being misplaced.
- A non-foaming toothpaste can be used if you have difficulty spitting out the remaining toothpaste after brushing – speak with your pharmacist or dentist. You may find an unflavoured or alternative flavoured toothpaste more acceptable.
- Visiting a dentist regularly is a good idea. They can support you to maintain good gum and dental health. Try to find a dentist that you feel comfortable and familiar with to reduce any worry or anxiety about attending appointments. Continue to visit your dentist regularly to keep this a familiar task to you.

Ask for help from your family, carer or dental practice with any of the above suggestions if you feel unable to manage them by yourself. If you have concerns about your dental health and are looking for more information you can also try calling 111.

Medication

Medication can be taken to help with different conditions and symptoms you may experience. It is important to take your medication as prescribed by your doctor. Sometimes, medication can cause side effects that affect your ability to eat and drink and this can impact your wellbeing and quality of life. Common side effects include:

- loss of appetite
- feeling sick (nausea)
- diarrhoea or vomiting
- headaches
- feeling tired or dizzy
- difficulty sleeping well.

Sometimes these side effects get better after a few weeks of taking the medication. If they are concerning or do not go away after a few weeks, it is important to talk to your GP or pharmacist. It's essential to ask for advice first before stopping a medication because of the side effects.

If you find it difficult to swallow medication, speak to your GP or pharmacist as they may be able to offer you an alternative form of medication e.g. a liquid, dispersible tablet or patch.

When visiting your GP or other health care professional, you may find it helpful to take a list of your medications with you to the appointment.

Further support

If you are concerned about your nutrition, are eating less for more than a week without a reason, or you are losing a lot of weight without trying, speak to your GP or health care professional for further support and advice.

If your weight is slightly above the average range, don't be too concerned. It is much more important to eat for health and well-being while continuing to enjoy your meals. If you feel you need additional support, contact your GP.