



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Creating a positive dining experience

For care home residents...



Making the most of Mealtimes...

For many of us, mealtimes are an important part of our daily routine. Whether it's a chance to sit down with family and catch up on the events of the day, or take some time to "down tools" and grab a bite in peace, they're about more than simply satisfying our appetites – although, of course, that's important too! They're social occasions, quality time, or a break from the task in hand.

For care home residents, mealtimes can be even more important. A good dining experience can help enhance social interaction, build a sense of community and increase nutritional intake – all of which contribute to a person's mental and physical well-being.

We've developed a range of help and advice to support your care home in making the most of mealtimes.



“You are what you eat...”

...is how the saying goes. So, while we're focusing on the elements that make up a positive dining experience, this doesn't take away from the importance of providing a variety of good quality food for each meal and ensuring residents are sufficiently hydrated. The My Home Life Bulletin 'Food, Glorious Food' has some great mealtime ideas and advice.

First impressions

It's not just *what* you eat, but *where* you eat. A welcoming and comfortable environment, with calming and informal décor, is an important first step in creating a positive dining experience.

Greeting people as they arrive and asking them where they would like to sit seems like a small thing, but it helps to set the tone for the rest of the meal. Remember that some people may need help getting to their table, so there will need to be staff on hand to assist them.

The table

A well presented table is a central part of the overall ambience. Good quality table linen, a small vase of flowers, fresh water and a menu all contribute to the overall look of the room.

The menu

Having a menu lets people know what to expect and helps them to be clear about what they're choosing to eat. Remember that not everyone will be familiar with the same dishes, so having a description of the food can be helpful.

Making sure the text is clearly legible and including pictures of the meal options available supports people with visual impairments or who have difficulty reading.





Conversations and celebrations

Each mealtime offers a valuable opportunity for social interaction – food can be a great way to get people talking! Arranging tables with people grouped together and encouraging staff and volunteers to eat their meals with residents can help to start the conversations flowing.

If some people aren't able to sit at a table, or join residents in the dining room, it's important that they still get opportunities to engage with others at mealtimes. How can you help this to happen? How do you support wheelchair users at mealtimes?

Mealtimes are a great way to get family and friends involved in the care home community – why not invite them in to join residents for lunch or dinner? Or does the home have a communal area where residents and guests can come together and enjoy some refreshments in a relaxed, social setting outside of formal mealtimes?

Birthdays, anniversaries and other celebratory occasions offer lots more opportunities for making mealtimes fun and engaging. You could involve residents in planning the event, decorating the room and even dishing out the cake!

Having choice

Being able to have a say in what they eat and when they eat is really important to people. Chatting to residents about their favourite foods and incorporating them in the menu is a great way to involve people in mealtimes, as well as encourage them to eat.

Some people will have food allergies or specific dietary requirements, perhaps for medical, religious and/or cultural reasons, so menus should be adapted to reflect these needs, ensuring residents get a good range of options to choose from.

As people's appetites can vary, giving residents some flexibility around when they eat is a good idea (if practical). While some people might be ready to eat at 12.00 on the dot, others might feel like a later lunch. Either way, having "snack stations" available throughout the day and offering a bite before bedtime ensures there is always something available for when people are peckish.

In addition to what and when, it's also a good idea to give people a choice about where they eat. Some residents may, on occasion, want to eat in their rooms, while others would prefer a tray on their laps in front of the TV.

Getting involved

Some people enjoy cooking and will want to continue this in the care home. If it's not possible to get them involved in the kitchen (e.g. chopping vegetables or making simple dishes), asking them to help with serving the food or laying the table is a great way to ensure that they're still involved in mealtime preparation.

Why not encourage people to put forward their favourite recipes and, when they're on the menu, publicise them around the home? For example: "Today for dessert: Mary's apple pie." Or, how about getting people involved in tasting sessions when the chef is trying out new recipes?

Presentation

We've probably all been told "you don't eat with your eyes" but, to some extent, we do! How food looks on the plate can play a big part in encouraging people to eat. Meals should be fresh and appetising, with thought given to textures and colours. The colour of the crockery, for example, helps people with dementia to see a contrast between their food and the plate.

People who are unable to eat solids should still be able to enjoy meals that look appealing; using moulds can help to enhance the appearance of pureed food.

As appetites tend to diminish as people grow older, portion sizes and the size of bowls and plates should be adapted to reflect this. Take care to ensure that people are still getting the nutrients they need if they're eating less – smaller, more frequent nutritious snacks can help.

Service

Having staff on hand to talk through the menu and bring over the residents' food adds a personal touch to mealtimes and can help in encouraging people to eat. Serving groups seated together at the same time ensures that they can enjoy their meals at the same pace.

Menu
'Today for dessert'
Mary's apple pie



Helping and encouraging

Some older people, particularly those with dementia, need help and encouragement to eat during mealtimes. Doing this sensitively and discreetly helps to maintain people's dignity. Remember that residents' appetites and the speed at which they'll be comfortable eating will vary for each individual.

Good oral health

If a resident seems to have gone off their food, but you're not sure why, it may be that problems with their teeth or mouth are making it difficult for them to eat.

Leaving foods which are harder to chew, dribbling, wincing or showing signs of discomfort when eating are all signs that something is wrong with their oral health. Loose dentures may also make it difficult to eat certain foods.

You can help to prevent this by supporting good oral hygiene, ensuring that mouths are clean and free from food debris from one meal to another, and providing regular access to a dentist. Some medications may cause a dry mouth, so having water readily available can help to avoid this.

Supporting people with dementia at mealtimes

Residents will each have their own set of individual circumstances which will need tailored care and support. In particular, people with dementia may need extra help at mealtimes. They can have a number of specific issues when it comes to eating and drinking, such as difficulty in co-ordinating tasks (e.g. using a knife and fork), inability to recognise food or being easily distracted before finishing a meal.

- Taking the time to provide care givers with the right training and guidance will increase knowledge and understanding throughout the home
- Enabling those who need help with eating to have their meals in the dining room with other residents plays an important part in ensuring they're part of the care home community

- A dining environment that isn't too noisy, stressful or crowded, and has a recognisably 'homely' look and feel, helps put people at ease
- Introducing routine seating plans so that people become familiar with their area of the dining room is another way of making people feel more relaxed
- Keeping small bowls of snacks and jugs of water around the home is a good idea for triggering appetites in those who can forget to eat and drink.

In their bulletin entitled 'Food, Glorious Food!', My Home Life explain that some people with dementia experience quite dramatic changes in how things taste and trying out different flavours can have surprising results. Some care homes try serving dessert first for people who prefer the taste of sweet things, as it can encourage their appetites in time for the main course. It's really important that changing tastes and preferences are reflected in care planning and reviewed frequently.



Want to know more?

There is a wealth of information out there designed to help you create a positive dining experience for your residents, full of healthy and nutritious meals.

Why not take a look at the following resources:

My Home Life (Issue 18): Food, Glorious Food!
www.myhomelife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/MHL-Bulletin-ISSUE-18-WEB.pdf

Menus Count: www.menuscount.org.uk

Vegetarian for Life: www.vegetarianforlife.org.uk