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## Eat Well, Be Well

### THE SITUATION

It is a given that we must eat to survive. For a person with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia, this daily ritual can be overwhelming, frustrating, and, if complications arise, possibly harmful.

Embarrassment at not remembering whether he or she has eaten or how to feed oneself may cause confrontational behavior or avoidance of mealtime. As a result, this activity of daily living can become challenging for people with Alzheimer's disease—and their caregivers. Observing your loved one's eating habits and abilities will guide you in adopting the appropriate measures. Here are some tips that will help ensure proper nutrition and safety:

### THE SOLUTION

- ▶ **Be prepared.** Make sure that your loved one has his or her necessary appliances, such as dentures, hearing aids or glasses.
- ▶ **Prepare the right food.** Consider the person's favorite foods when designing menus. When possible, allow your loved one to assist in simple food preparation; this could work as an appetite stimulator. Grind or cut foods into bite-sized portions in order to lessen the work of chewing and limit the risk of choking. Try to avoid items that may be difficult to chew and swallow, such as nuts and raw carrots. Be sure the temperature of the food is safe.
- ▶ **Promote independence.** To ease self-feeding, provide finger foods and utensils with large handles. A spoon may be easier to use than a fork. A mug with a lid cover or a flexible straw can help prevent spills. In addition, offer verbal and physical cues.
- ▶ **Limit confusion.** Give simple instructions and, if necessary, gently repeat them. In addition, since a busy plate can be confusing, serve one or two

foods at a time and provide only the utensils needed for those items. Also try using solid-colored dishes with placemats or tablecloths that are a dissimilar color to help establish the difference between the plate and the table. Minimize environmental distractions, such as the TV or dog barking.

- ▶ **Be social.** Meals can be a pleasant opportunity for your loved one to interact with you or others. Certain aromas may arouse memories as well as appetite. Use a gentle, inviting voice to encourage conversation.
- ▶ **Be patient.** Allow the extra time the person may need to finish eating. Provide assurance that the food is safe if he or she indicates a fear of being poisoned.
- ▶ **Maintain oral hygiene.** Make sure your loved one brushes after meals, assisting if required. If brushing is painful or difficult, use oral swabs. Check for sores, uncomfortable dentures or gum ailments since these symptoms may lead to poor eating habits. Keep regular dental visits.

— SAIDAH HENDERSON

### PREPARE IN ADVANCE

*Weight loss can indicate eating problems or other medical conditions, such as depression. If your loved one loses at least 2.5 pounds within a two-week period, contact his or her primary care physician. Additionally, if you suspect chewing or swallowing difficulties, consult with a speech therapist for a thorough assessment.*