**Nutrition Concerns for Individuals with Dementia**

By Barbara Gordon

**Eating Challenges with Dementia**

Weight loss is common and tends to become more severe as dementia gets worse. In addition to simply forgetting to eat, there are other reasons weight loss might occur:

* Appetite triggers in the brain may not be working normally or medications may impact the desire to eat.
* Food may taste bland due to changes in sense of smell and taste.
* Difficulty focusing may cause an individual to spend less time eating and therefore consume fewer calories.
* Coordination skills might decline, making use of eating utensils or feeding oneself difficult.
* Chewing and swallowing problems can make it difficult to eat. Some individuals may be prescribed diets that include softer foods to help encourage intake or thickened liquids for easier swallowing.

**Healthy Eating for Individuals with Dementia**

The research on specific foods and eating patterns for reversing dementia is limited. However, there is some research that suggests certain eating patterns may play a role in preventing or delaying the onset of dementia. The Mediterranean diet, DASH diet and MIND diet have all been studied for its role in prevention of dementia with some promising results. At this time, more research is needed to understand the preventative effects of these diets.

The goal for most individuals with dementia is to eat a variety of foods needed for good nutrition status. For individuals who may be on a special diet for other health conditions such as diabetes or high cholesterol, health care providers may lift these restrictions to promote better overall intake. As dementia worsens, some individuals may require more calories because of increased activity. Oral nutrition supplements are often recommended to help get the calories and nutrients needed to maintain weight.

As we age our thirst sensation decreases. Add this to the other challenges of dementia and individuals may also be at an increased risk of dehydration. Encouraging fluid intake and providing foods that are rich in water, such as fruits and vegetables, can also help.

Mealtimes are also an important part of ensuring an individual with dementia gets enough to eat. Serving meals at a kitchen or dining table can help them focus on the task of eating. Individuals with dementia can become easily distracted, so avoid using patterned plates, having too many items on the table and turn off the television during meals. Eating with others in a family-style setting may help them to focus on eating and increase how much they eat.