



Top 10 tips for small appetites

Losing weight, not wanting to eat or not being able to eat much are not 'normal' aspects of ageing.

Weight loss and low calorie intake can result in an increased risk of falls, low-mood, slower healing and recovery and lower immunity.

Even small changes in what a person eats and how food is offered can improve a small appetite. Specific problems may need specialist help from a dietician or medical / care professional.

Enjoying food and the social aspect of eating is a big part of everyone's health and wellbeing and as we get older it can become increasingly important.

*"First we eat,
then we do everything else"*

M.F.K. Fisher

Getting older, or caring for an older person, means you may need to learn new skills or knowledge which can help you to live well.

Information and help is available you can look online or call.

Information about nutrition and hydration for specific conditions is available from organisations such as <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk>

Local Information and Advice Services can help with resources, signposting and advice.

Age UK has a wide range of information resources available online <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/> and from information hubs in their shops and services.

Age UK Derby and Derbyshire has a free, independent and confidential local information and advice service and local services to help T: 01773 768240.

Carers UK have developed an e-learning resource available for carers about good nutrition. You can find the resource at

<https://www.carersuk.org/help-and-advice/technology-and-equipment/e-learning-nutrition-carers>



1. Get the mechanics right

☺ Make sure dentures fit, are cleaned regularly and the mouth and tongue too. Some medications can make the mouth dry or saliva thicken affecting swallowing and taste. Mouth rinses, sips of water before and during a meal and the types of food can help.

👁 Eyesight needs to be checked regularly and glasses if worn need to *be* worn! Low vision can make eating difficult and food unappealing. Contrasting the colour of food and plate can help

✋ Wash hands before mealtimes and ensure meals are served in a comfortable position. Ensure personal care routines are done before a meal with time to rest. Sitting up at the table where possible and following routines can help where people are resistant to eating. Don't worry too much about messy eating as eating independently where possible is best. Use non-slip mats under plates, a pasta or soup bowl with a lip, comfort grips on cutlery or a spoon instead of a knife and fork. Adjust the cutlery, plates and food offered to help maintain independence.

🔪 Nobody feels like eating when they are in pain or are constipated. Get treatment and use it routinely. Try and separate medication from the mealtime experience so that tablets don't dominate.

2. Get the food right

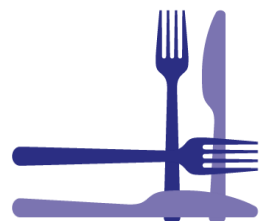
- Whatever the food is think:
 - ✓ **Flavour**
 - ✓ **Texture**
 - ✓ **Density**
 - ✓ **Temperature**
- **Familiar foods.** Comforting foods and easy to eat foods like soups and stews can help provide emotional as well as physical comfort. Family favorites and 'getting better' meals like eggs and fish can key into and encourage a sense of recovery.
- **Dare to be different.** Food should not be bland: salty, sweet and sour tastes all encourage chewing and swallowing. Milk products increase mucous secretions, which, in some circumstances, may increase swallowing difficulty, while oily liquids, such as meat broth, make secretions thinner. Loss of senses and 80 + years of cottage pie can mean food has become boring. Try some exotic bright fruits as finger food or slightly spicy foods for a change.

"Everything you see I owe to spaghetti"

Sophia Loren

3. Set the scene

- **Get ready.** Anticipation can stimulate the appetite. Warm pleasant cooking smells and sounds can help and mealtime routines such as washing hands or saying grace can help prepare the mind for eating.
- **Get Set.** Focus on the food. For people living with dementia distractions can mean they forget about the food or become confused and frustrated. Clear the table of unnecessary items and just provide the cutlery needed. Use familiar place settings, table cloth etc and these can become associated with particular meals. Turn off the TV and radio though a little background music might help. Make sure the room is at a reasonable temperature and turn off the phone and other potential distractions.
- **Go!** Keep up a gentle conversation and use this to prompt and encourage as eating slows. Keep to one or two items at a time and just serve one course at a time. Seeing everything can be overwhelming or distracting. Take time, it's not a race but don't let mealtimes become an endurance test or a form of bullying.



4. Make eating fun again

- **Eating is a social experience.** Have a sociable family meal, invite a neighbour in for a meal or alternate cooking a 'proper meal' and eating together with a friend. Companionship can help older people eat more and comparison can help them understand their food intake is insufficient.
- **Make any excuse for a party.** Cake for any celebration, a roast dinner on a Sunday or just a TV regular tea and biscuits break can all help increase the calorie intake and re-associate food with fun



5. Throw away the rule book

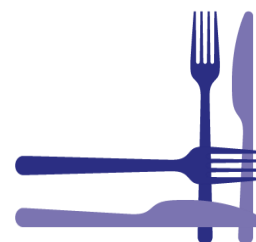
- **Yes you can have pudding before a main course,** and you can have a pudding even if you didn't eat your greens! Anything is better than nothing when first improving a small appetite so don't limit consumption because of social rules.
- **Prepare to be surprised.** Dementia, changes in taste and smell and personal tastes can mean some people develop some surprising combinations of foods. Go with it!
- **Eat more frequently.** 6 little meals are just as good or maybe better than 3 big ones. Where energy levels, concentration or small waistlines make eating a large meal difficult; smaller and more frequent meals can help.
- **Just eat.** Memory loss can mean people forget whether they ate. Try breaking meals down into parts so that they can have 4 breakfasts if they want to: porridge, toast, orange juice, tea. Don't worry if they want cornflakes for supper.

6. Think about the food (and the drink)

- **Finger food** and small items of food for 'grazing' can get some calories in under the radar. This is particularly useful when a person is resistant to eating more at a main mealtime. Every drink can be accompanied by a different snack.
- **Size does matter!** Prepare the food in small easy to manage sizes and shapes. Cut the sandwiches in small triangles so that the best part of the sandwich is eaten even if the crust is left, or pin-wheel sandwiches, cheese cubes or mini sausage rolls can all be 'popped in' without any effort.
- **Drinking is important.** Drinks can vary too and also encourage eating. Bovril will link well with savory snacks. Hot chocolate or milky drinks and an oat biscuit are comforting and nutritious. Cold refreshing soft drinks with spicy meals can stimulate eating and drinking.
- **Variety is the spice of life.** It's easy to get bored with food so plan to ensure plenty of variety.

7. Make every mouthful count

- When appetites are small every mouthful needs to contain as many nutrients as possible. Supplementing or fortifying foods or choosing higher calorie foods can help. Full-fat milk and cheese, eggs and milk to make creamy mashed potato, fortified cereals etc can all help add more food value per spoonful.
- Snacks and 'treats' can be fortified or chosen for the food value or served with added calories hidden in custard or cream.



8. Get help

- **Preparing meals** can become a chore and so tiring that the cook doesn't eat. Cooking smells and handling fresh meat or fish can also affect a weak appetite. Frozen meals, brought in meals and meal swaps with friends and neighbours can all help.
- **Shopping** can become a real challenge and food choices can be influenced by the practicalities of buying the food, carrying it home or even putting it away. Unhealthy convenience foods can become more tempting when shopping but not very tempting at a mealtime.
- **Practical tasks** like opening packets, cartons and jars gets harder with weak muscle tone, poor grip and low vision. Reaching, bending and lifting involved in cooking food can become like an obstacle course. Gadgets and aids can make some tasks easier, relocating utensils and food into easier to reach cupboards and selecting easier to open options in the supermarket can help.
- **Loneliness and isolation** can make eating a very upsetting experience. A solo meal can highlight the sense of loss after a bereavement or life change. Lunch clubs and regular sociable meals with family or friends can ensure at least some meals are something to look forward to.
- **Money.** Food is an essential but one that people can cut down on when times are hard. Welfare and health benefits, housing support, and grants are available. Make sure you are claiming everything you are entitled to.
- **Access to Money.** Paying for food means having access to cash or credit. Consider getting help with your finances and regular expenditure but seek help and advice before trusting anyone with access to your money.

9. Think about the person

- A trip to an old fashioned butcher, greengrocer and baker can stimulate the memory and the appetite.
- Resources for stimulating memories of food can be found in libraries, from charities and in local museums. Thinking about food and reminiscing can reveal forgotten 'favourites' and suggest ideas for menus.
- Cooking for one is a new and unwelcome experience for many older people. Courses, cookery books or advice menus can give ideas and a freezer can help them prepare larger amounts and freeze individual portions.
- Understand that individual preferences and style can be very important, especially when appetite is low. Everyone has favorite food and foods which repulse them. Ask about preferences and follow instructions carefully.
- Tell people who provide care or support about food preferences or needs especially when going into a care setting like a hospital.

10. Monitor the situation

- **Be sensitive to changes.** A weak appetite can be affected by even slight changes in a medical condition, emotion or mood. Getting help and support quickly can stop further weight loss.
- **Take extra care.** Extremes of weather can mean people with a small appetite are at an increased risk. Use all available extra support such as having a flu jab to reduce the risk of additional health problems.
- **Check** the fridge, bin, shopping bills, washing up rack or dishwasher for signs of regular eating. Buying and even cooking plenty of food doesn't necessarily mean it's been eaten. Make sure pets or wild birds haven't 'helped' tidy up most of the food.
- **Seek help** if there is a particular problem or despite efforts to improve appetite consumption does not increase to an acceptable level.

