

Assistance to eat and drink, for people with cognitive problems

This is useful if the person has cognitive difficulties that mean they cannot regulate the way they eat. They may be able to hold cutlery or crockery and just need help to regulate how they are eating/drinking.

Once a person is fully assisted (that is when someone else is doing everything – holding crockery/cutlery and placing it in the person's mouth), **the risk of aspiration increases.**

It is therefore safest to offer the least amount of assistance that is required. Eg:

1. Supervision and encouragement: this will be support to ensure that a person is using strategies that have been suggested, or to give directions as needed.
2. Verbal prompts: this is where you tell the person what they need to be doing. It might be: a prompt to chew and swallow; slow down; have a break; take smaller mouthfuls etc.
3. Light Physical support: this is where you provide physical support to increase the safety of the way the person eats. It might be: moving a plate or cup away to help slow down the rate of eating/drinking; light touch on hand or arm to slow down pace or facilitate taking breaths between mouthfuls.
4. Hand on hand support: this is where you support the person to hold the crockery/cutlery themselves by taking the weight or directing the movement to ensure food and drink reaches the mouth or to manage problems with pacing or bolus size.

Full assistance

This is where you hold the cutlery/crockery and place food/drink into the person's mouth. They do not play any part in this process. This will increase the risk of aspiration/choking and it is a skilled role. It should only be used if necessary. The person assisting should:

- Give their full attention to this task, especially watching for the movement of the Adam's apple which indicates a swallow has occurred.
- Sit at the person's height and ensure they are within the person's sight
- Consider the best utensil to use (see 'Utensils for Eating' or 'Utensils for drinking').
- Check the food is correctly prepared if the person is having a modified diet.

- Check the person is ready for each mouthful before putting it in the mouth. Sometimes hovering the fork at the lips will facilitate the person indicating if they are ready.
- Check the swallow has occurred and the mouth is mainly cleared of the previous mouthful, before putting any more in the mouth.
- Allow time between mouthfuls for the person to take a breath or two.
- Check after 3-4 mouthfuls that food is not building up inside the mouth. If this is the case, give time and prompts to clear it. Do not keep offering food if it is not being cleared.
- If food is not being cleared, offer an empty spoon or fork right into the mouth, as if it had food on it, as this will sometimes prompt a 'chew and swallow' movement.
- If the person coughs, give time to recover before carrying on.
- Offer mouthcare after meals and snacks to ensure mouth is left clean.

You may find there are some people in your team who seem to get better results when they are the ones assisting.

It can be helpful to watch how they are assisting people and learn from them. Similarly, it may be helpful for them to watch other people assisting, and see if they can offer some suggestions.