

Low oral intake: what to do if a person is not eating enough

Eating less food is not in itself a swallowing problem. But it may be an indication that there is a swallowing problem.

Complete the 'SLT initial questionnaire' to see if there are any other signs of a swallowing problem and take action suggested if there are.

Is there a time of day that the person eats more?	This may be because of tiredness/sleepiness/activity levels/concentration/appetite – try to offer more food/nutrition at the times when the person eats best
Drinks	Are drinks maximised for nutritional purposes? Eg. Milk-based rather than water-based; smoothies; soups; supplement drinks
Type of food	People sometimes eat certain types of food better than others. Eg. Savoury vs sweet; meat vs veg; spicy vs bland; chewy vs softer; snacks vs main meals; hot vs cold; finger foods
Likes and dislikes/preferences	Is the person being offered food they like? Are meals provided at the usual times the person would eat?
Support may be needed if a person is struggling to feed themselves	Specialist cutlery or crockery may be helpful (see 'Utensils for eating') Assistance is sometimes needed if the person cannot manage cutlery themselves (see 'Giving Assistance for Physical difficulties') Cognitive problems may mean the person needs encouragement, prompts, clear mealtime contextual cues, removal of distractions. (see 'Giving Assistance for Cognitive difficulties')

Try the following strategies to maximise oral intake and nutrition.

1. Identify what consistency of diet the person is currently eating. See www.iddsi.org/resources/patient-handouts

2. Complete MUST score. The MUST score will guide you about what action to take.
3. Complete your own oral intake charts over three days including all meals and snacks. Ensure you include quantities as exactly as you can.
4. Discuss with family or friends to find out if you are offering the person food that he/she likes and would eat at the times provided.

Use this information to consider:

Food First	This is an approach to increase the nutritional content of the food that does get eaten. Boost calories by fortifying meals and snacks. See 'Food First advice'.
Supplement drinks	Home made fortified drinks can be offered, such as milkshakes and smoothies. Ready made items can be purchased or powders that can be made into build-up drinks. GP can prescribe supplement drinks: ensure these are at the correct IDDSI level if the person is having thickened drinks.
Dietetic advice	Refer to dietitian if these steps have been taken but have not helped.