



# What to Do When Your Loved One Is Always Hungry

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## Strategies to Satisfy a Difficult Appetite

When you care for someone with Alzheimer's, you will meet more than your fair share of challenges. As memory weakens and brain signals deteriorate, major changes in appetite are common — and difficult to handle.

If you're struggling to keep up with an insatiable appetite, you're not alone. Many Alzheimer's patients begin to eat more food, or eat more frequently, leading to weight gain and even unreasonable cravings. Sometimes they grab food off of others' plates or begin to eat inedible items.

As a caregiver, you have a difficult task when it comes to food: you need to cater to your loved one's physical needs, keep them calm, and find ways to compromise. Fortunately, understanding where the hunger is coming from will help you find a safe and effective way to control eating behaviors.

## Why Is Hunger a Problem With Alzheimer's Patients?

Alzheimer's disease is divided into several stages. In the early stages, you'll notice some memory loss, depression or anxiety, and certain personality changes.

The following stages bring trouble with coordination, communication and comprehension. By the final stage, mental disorientation and physical deterioration can interfere with everything from talking to swallowing to walking.

The middle to late stages are where eating extremes come into play. This is when the areas of the brain responsible for muscle coordination, concentration and memory begin to deteriorate, making communication difficult and frustrating. Changes in eating habits may follow, due to:

- Confusion
- Depression
- Mood swings
- Restlessness

In many cases, Alzheimer's chips away at the appetite and makes you forget to eat, leading to anorexia or malnutrition. But not everyone reacts that way. For some patients, the depression, anxiety, restlessness and forgetfulness leads to gorging, or compulsive eating.

Changes in the hypothalamus (the hunger center in the brain) can make it difficult to recognize when the stomach is empty or full. Also, as memory gets worse and worse, Alzheimer's patients may simply forget to eat when they are hungry.

## Techniques to Calm Hunger

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Extremely limited short-term memory certainly makes things difficult. When you've served a meal, only to be asked when the next one will come, it can try your patience. Of course, simply leaving snacks out in the open will lead to overeating.

Try these approaches to satisfy your loved one's demands without compromising their health (or your sanity):

- **Serve several small meals a day.** There's nothing wrong with eating more often, as long as each serving is adjusted appropriately. Try dividing each meal into two meals, then space them a couple hours apart.
- **Stock up on low-calorie snacks.** It's often much easier to give into demands than it is to reason with an Alzheimer's patient. If they constantly insist they need food, have a platter at the ready — just make sure it's healthy, satisfying and low calorie.
- **Keep certain foods locked away.** If they're prone to wandering and poking into corners and cupboards, they'll eventually find the food they want. The simple solution is to keep those spaces clean and clear of tantalizing treats.
- **Find happy distractions.** Remember, the desire to eat might not have anything to do with hunger, but rather with an uneasy feeling. The best way to change a vague feeling of unrest is to change the situation: suggest you go for a walk or run a simple errand before eating.

### **Preparing for the Next Stage**

Insatiable hunger is difficult to deal with, but it won't last forever. In the final stages of Alzheimer's, the hunger messages from the hypothalamus cease and eating patterns can swing in the opposite direction. Extreme weight loss is common, and that can set the stage for injury, illness and infection.

After trying to curb weight gain for so long, you'll have to focus your efforts on preventing weight loss. This means finding high-calorie foods that are easy and pleasant to eat. Although appetite will wane as Alzheimer's progresses, sweet foods are usually still appealing.

Alzheimer's is not an easy disease to deal with at any time, but it gets much harder to handle the challenges on your own as time goes on. There are many people in your position who might be able to offer some sound advice, and professionals to help you protect your own health while you care for your loved one. Reach out for support when you need it.