

Mealtime and Swallowing

Advancing Parkinson's frequently causes difficulty with eating and drinking because of both movement and swallowing problems. You might need to change the types of foods you serve or the utensils the person with Parkinson's uses, and you might need to help your loved one eat so he or she gets adequate nutrition.

General Tips

- » **Schedule mealtimes when Parkinson's medications are working best.**
- » **Use adaptive utensils and cups**, including curved and/or built-up forks and spoons, rocker knives, plate guards, nosey cups and covered cups.
- » **An occupational therapist** can help determine what types of adaptive equipment might work best. Ask the doctor for a referral.
- » When providing feeding assistance, **give small bites**, and allow adequate time for thorough chewing and a complete swallow.
- » Dehydration can occur due to inadequate fluid intake. Know the symptoms: increased confusion, low blood pressure, dizziness, dark colored urine.



Mealtime Set-up

- » **Choose a pleasant, quiet environment** without a lot of distractions.
- » **Use small pillows or cushions** to keep posture upright.
- » **Place the plate and cup on an elevated tray** if your loved one has neck immobility or vision changes.
- » **Protect clothing** with a neck napkin, apron or other protective garment.
- » Changes in vision may make it more difficult for your loved one if the color of the food is the same color as the dish. **Consider using dark dishes when serving light-colored foods, and light dishes when serving dark foods.**
- » **Cut food into bite-size portions.**

Types of Foods to Serve

- » **Avoid tough, dry or crumbly textures** that might be difficult to swallow.
- » **Consider foods that can be cut into smaller "finger food" portions** to maximize independence.
- » **Choose foods that are easier to chew and swallow.** For example:
 - Lean hamburger or beef stew (avoid steak)
 - Baked or broiled fish
 - Eggs (a good way to get protein, and there are many ways to serve them)
 - Cooked vegetables
 - Soft fruits such as berries and melons
 - Rice, whole grains and beans
 - Gravies, sauces or butter (moisten foods for easier swallowing)
- » If weight loss is a problem, see "Tips for Gaining Weight" on the next page.

Drinking

- » **Make sure your loved one gets 48-64 ounces of liquid daily.** This means 6 to 8 glasses of liquid per day. One easy way to increase daily liquid intake is to drink a glass of water with each Parkinson's medication dose.
- » **Encourage sips of liquid between solid foods.**
- » **Shorten the length of straws** by cutting off part of the bottom to decrease the volume of liquid consumed through the straw at one time.
- » **Serve foods with higher liquid contents**, such as fruits, vegetables, Jell-O and ice cream.



WATCH THE VIDEOS

Mealtime and Swallowing, Parts 1 and 2

Online at [Parkinson.org/videos](https://www.parkinson.org/videos) in the "CareMAP How-to Videos" playlist

Mealtime Fatigue

- » **Serve small, frequent meals** if your loved one experiences weight loss, low blood pressure or fatigue or feels full quickly.
- » **Maintain an upright sitting posture for 30 minutes after each meal** to prevent aspiration.
- » **Always give food or medications when your loved one is seated in an upright position**, not when reclined or lying down.

Swallowing Difficulty

- » **Report swallowing difficulties**, coughing or choking episodes to the doctor for evaluation.
- » **Consider a referral to a speech language pathologist** for evaluation and recommendations for changing food and liquid consistencies for safer swallowing.
- » Attend a Red Cross class to **learn the Heimlich maneuver** to be ready in case of an emergency.
- » **Feeding tubes** may be considered for those with severe swallowing problems. This is a choice that should be carefully considered with input from the person with Parkinson's, family and the healthcare team.
- » Consult your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if whole medications are not able to be swallowed. *See tip sheet "Medications On Time, Every Time" on page 154 for more information.*

Sometimes we found it was easier to celebrate an occasion without food and not make that the focus. So we would have a birthday party for the kids in a park and have cake and ice cream, and it worked great. We had to shift our thinking a little bit but still have the celebration.

– LENNORE, CARED FOR HUSBAND, ROGER



TIPS FOR GAINING WEIGHT

Weight loss may occur with advancing Parkinson's. Difficulty swallowing, feeling full or bloated and improperly-fitting partial plates or dentures are all potential reasons. Discuss concerns regarding weight loss with your loved one's medical team.

Switch from 3 regular meals to **5-6 smaller meals daily**.

Switch to a higher fat milk, such as 2% or whole milk.
Choose flavored milk or whole milk yogurt for variety.

Drink 100% fruit juices instead of water.

Add butter, nut butters, gravy, sauces and/or avocado to the diet to **add calories**.

Eat fruit canned in syrup or frozen with sugar.

Serve vegetables with cheese spreads, sour cream, dips, salad dressings or sauces.

Drink a high calorie nutritional beverage between meals.
Even 4 ounces twice daily will add calories.

Choose drink supplements that are high-calorie, not high-protein.

Purchase or blend a nutritional smoothie, using bottled or powder supplements, adding fruit or syrups for flavor.

Blend a milkshake using 2% or whole milk with fresh fruit or syrup and a scoop of ice cream.

Prepare pudding with 2% or whole milk, and top with crushed graham crackers and whipped cream.

Offer ice cream or frozen yogurt, topped with syrup or fruit.

