

Chewing Difficulties

How carers, nurses and family can help reduce the impact of chewing difficulties

Why does chewing food become difficult or tiring?

Chewing can be harder because of:

- Missing teeth or poorly fitting dentures;
- Mouth soreness, infection or dry mouth;
- Reduced jaw strength or tiredness;
- General frailty or poor appetite.

What have you noticed?

Patients might:

- Be chewing each bite for a very long time;
- Not finish their meals or take a very long time to finish;
- Have food remaining in their mouth;
- Spit out harder food or lumps;
- Ask for softer foods.

What helps? Strategies for staff and carers to try:

Before eating:

- **Check condition of teeth or dentures** - poorly fitting dentures can make chewing difficult. Seek a dental review if needed;
- **Ensure patient is well hydrated.** Dry mouth can increase difficulty chewing and moving food around the mouth;
- **Maintain good mouth care** as soreness or infections can make chewing uncomfortable.

Choosing the best consistency foods:

- **Choose softer foods or easy to chew food** such as casseroles, well-cooked vegetables, pasta, stewed fruit etc. (See *IDDSI Level 7 Easy to Chew diet for ideas*);
- **Cut soft food into small pieces.** (See *IDDSI Level 6 Soft and Bite-sized diet for ideas*);
- **Patients with no teeth or dentures may need minced or mashed foods, particularly for their main meals.** E.g. scrambled eggs, porridge, shepherd's pie etc. Use methods like mashing, shredding or blending to reduce the effort needed when chewing. (See *IDDSI Level 5 diet Minced and Moist diet for ideas*);
- Some patients may still manage to eat some food or snacks that **dissolve into a paste or melt in their mouth** (e.g. very soft, moist sponge cake, Skips or Pom-Bears type crisps, chocolate buttons). (See *IDDSI Transitional Foods*);
- **Add moisture** e.g., sauces, gravy, custard, cream or soups. This will help soften food and make them easier to chew and swallow;

- **Avoid difficult food textures** such as hard or dry, tough or fibrous, chewy, crispy, crunchy, sharp, pips, seeds, bone or gristle, sticky or gummy, and stringy food;
- **Consider nutritional supplements** (e.g., fortified drinks) if patient is struggling to maintain weight while chewing is difficult.

Strategies:

- **Slow pace**, resting between bites and mouthfuls to avoid fatigue;
- **Try alternating bites of food with sips of fluid** to help clear food from the mouth;
- **Mouth care after eating. Check for food residue** inside mouth / cheeks after eating and ensure this is removed and the mouth is clean and empty (*See Leaflet: 4 Mouth Care*).

For further information: www.iddsi.org/resources/patient-handouts

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