

Independent Mealtime

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Mealtime and Feeding

As we age, there are many factors that could contribute to limitations in being able to feed ourselves. Some conditions that could impact self-feeding include Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, brain injuries including traumatic brain injury and stroke, muscular dystrophy, or any condition that may present with a tremor (Mandy et al., 2018). The inability to feed oneself has been linked to feelings of shame, incompetence, decreased self-esteem, and fear (Mandy et al., 2018). An occupational therapist can play an important role in feeding, eating, and swallowing to increase independence in mealtime and decrease these negative feelings (Mandy et al., 2018). In this blog entry, you will find different strategies and assistive devices that may help to increase independence and satisfaction in mealtime.

Devices to Increase Independence in Feeding

There are many different assistive devices that can be used to promote independent feeding during mealtime. These assistive devices can include utensils, plates or bowls, and beverage containers that can make feeding easier depending on your impairment. Listed below are devices that could be used for common physical impairments that may be encountered. Step by step instructions on the use of these devices can be found at the end of the blog entry.



For someone with an **impaired grip**, utensils that have built-up handles or a cup that has handles on both sides could make eating and drinking easier.

For someone **without any grip** present, a universal cuff or utensil holder can be used to self-feed without having to grasp the utensil.



For someone experiencing **tremors**, a weighted utensil or weighted cup could help prevent spillage when feeding. The amount of weight that is beneficial depends on the individual (Barney & Perkinson, 2016).

For someone with use of **only one hand** or that has **difficulty scooping food**, high-sided dishes, food guards, suction cup mats, or easy-cut plates can be used. Each of these devices can help to scoop food onto your utensil and prevent the dish from moving in the process.



For someone who has **difficulty tipping the head** to drink, a cup with a straw or a nosey cup can be used for easy drinking access.

For someone with **visual impairments**, dishes that contrast the color of the food you are eating can help to see the food for easier scooping.



Other Ways to Increase Mealtime Independence



Besides assistive devices, there are other things that could be impacting independent feeding. One thing to consider is the position in which you are seated. The ideal position to be seated while eating is for the hips, knees, and feet to be 90 degrees and weight distributed equally, head upright and slightly forward, and chair close to the table (Barney & Perkinson, 2016). This position is good to prevent choking and promote proper digestion (Barney & Perkinson, 2016). If positioning is good and there is still issues with eating or swallowing, an OT or SLP should be consulted for further interventions.

Resources

For training and interventions with assistive devices or consultation for eating and swallowing disorders, contact your physician to receive a referral for OT or SLP services. Let them know you are having difficulties with eating and drinking independently.

If you are having difficulties finding foods that are easier to eat independently that still give you good nutrition, a guide to healthy foods for older adults can be found at this link:

<https://www.nutrition.gov/topics/nutrition-age/older-individuals>

To acquire devices discussed in this article, talk to your OT, visit a medical supply store or visit an online retailer such as amazon. Prices can be found in the guides below.



Interprofessional Team

Speech Language Pathologist (SLP): SLPs are important to address feeding and swallowing disorders. If mealtime may be difficult because of swallowing or choking concerns, an SLP should be consulting. These issues need to be addressed before incorporating new interventions or devices to help with independent feeding.

Dietician: A dietician can help ensure that you are receiving the proper nutrients needed to maintain a healthy life. They may provide suggestions on foods that may be easier to eat independently but still give the proper nutritional value needed during meals.

Improvements to Occupational Engagement

Eating is an essential part of life and is an activity or occupation that is central to an older adults' identity and sense of competence (Barney & Perkinson, 2016). Eating can also be seen as an activity that everyone engages in throughout the lifespan to fulfill time and give life meaning (Barney & Parkinson, 2016). Those with disabilities who can eat independently have a better sense of control, security, and hope for their future (Mandy et al., 2018). Through the use of assistive devices or goal directed interventions for feeding, anyone can have the opportunity to be independent at mealtime and live a more satisfactory life. These devices or interventions could allow a person to feel more comfortable eating with friends and family, going out to eat, or feel safe getting the nourishment they need to survive.

References

- Barney, K. F., & Perkinson, M. A. (2016). *Occupational therapy for older adults*. Elsevier.
- Mandy, A., Sims, T., Stew, G., & Onions, D. (2018). Manual feeding device experiences of people with a neurodisability. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 72(3), p.7203345010p1-7203345010p5. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2018.025353>

Guides to Using the Assistive Devices:

(The links provided next to each device will take you directly to the page where they can be purchased)

Built up Handles: Set for \$34 on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Step 1: Grab builtup handle utensil or attach a thick foam piece to the handle of your utensil.

Step 2: Proceed with eating as you normally would, with a better grasp on your utensil.

Cup with handles on both sides: Similar cup for \$11 on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Step 1: Fill cup about $\frac{3}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ full.

Step 2: Grab cup with both hands.

Step 3: Bring to mouth and drink slowly to prevent spillage.

Universal cuff or utensil holder: \$14 on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Step 1: Place cuff over the palm of your hand.

Step 2: Insert desired utensil into the slot on the cuff.

Step 3: Use arm movements to scoop and pick up food without having to grab and hold onto utensil.

Weighted utensil: Set of 4 for \$20 on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Step 1: Grab weighted utensil to reduce tremors when eating.

Step 2: Grab food with utensil and eat as usual.

Weighted cup: \$27 on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Step 1: Add liquid to weighted cup but do not fill to the top.

Step 2: Attach lid to give extra security and prevent spillage.

Step 3: Grab cup and bring to mouth to drink.

High sided dishes: Similar found for \$8 on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Step 1: Add food to high sided dish.

Step 2: Using utensil of choice, scoop food off of plate by scooting food toward the high side of the plate.

Step 3: Secure food onto utensil and bring to mouth to eat.

Food guards: Similar found for \$13 on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Step 1: Attach food guard to a plate that you already have.

Step 2: Using utensil of choice, scoot food to the side of the plate with the guard.

Step 3: Scoop and secure food on utensil using the guard

Step 4: Bring food to mouth to eat.

Easy-cut plates: Found for \$50 on [devinemedical.com](https://www.devinemedical.com)



Step 1: Place piece of food that needs to be cut on the metal prongs on the easy-cut plate.

Step 2: While the food is secured to the prongs, you can use one hand to cut the food.

Step 3: Grab food with fork or spoon and bring to mouth to eat.

Cup with straw: Similar set of 6 found for \$12 on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Step 1: Retrieve cup with straw or grab a straw to place into any cup.

Step 2: Pour liquid into cup ensuring that you do not fill it to the top.

Step 3: Place lid with straw over cup or simply place the straw into the cup.

Step 4: Bring straw to mouth and suck to drink.

Nosey cup: Set of 3 found for \$9 on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Step 1: Fill cup with liquid ensuring not to fill to the top of the notch in the cup.

Step 2: Bring cup to mouth and tilt the cup to drink without tilting your head back.