

# Ten Reasons Why Your Parent May Not Be Eating Properly...and What To Do About It

By Leonard J. Hansen

Proper nutrition is vital to your parent for maintaining health, retaining and building bone mass and, importantly, to enable medications to work effectively in the body -- and possibly with fewer side effects.

But, what if Mom or Dad won't eat whether properly, or won't eat enough? This creates an added challenge to you as caregiver. There may be valid reasons that your parent may shy away from dining. As the caregiver, it is your job to uncover the reasons why your parent is not eating, and try to address the underlying issues. Here are 10 reasons why seniors sometimes don't eat properly, according to the National Institutes of Health and its National Institute on Aging, plus augmented in one-on-one-interviews of professional caregivers.

## **1. Reduction in senses of smell and taste**

Dining involves many senses: aromas, colors and tastes in one's mouth; but many mature adults experience a lessening of the senses of smell and taste in their aging process. There is a reduction in the experience that, in turn, lessens the personal desire for food. There is no magic pill to restore full senses of smell and taste.

As caregiver and chief cook, you can alter your recipes, switching from typical spices used in the past or as used by your parent in his or her own cooking, to herbs and spices with a bit more tang, and that introduce a new, added flavor to the dish.

## **2. Reduction in sense of sight**

Cataracts and other conditions in the eyes can reduce your parent's visual perception of the meal servings, thereby reducing the image to "blah."

You can easily enhance the visual representation by increasing the food colors on the plate, separating them so that the colors are defined and easily perceived. Consider a main course with a colorful topping, a multi-colored salad, red potatoes, or orange carrots. Of course, vary the plate presentation by the day, that is, unless your parent really responds to one or two of your designer presentations. In this way you can reach effectively through to the remaining sense of vision.

## **3. Medications**

Some medications can change your parent's sense of taste or make her or him less hungry. Ask your parent's doctor if the [prescribed medications](#) or medical treatments are causing loss of

appetite, bad taste or no flavor. The physician may be able to substitute with a different medication, or prescribe an added medication to correct the problem.

#### **4. Constipation**

A side effect of many prescription drugs is constipation, a most uncomfortable condition where the patient claims to have no room left for additional food. The first step to solution is to reduce the incidence of constipation.

Consider increasing the amount of water your parent drinks throughout the day. With the proper diet and nutrition, the water will help clear the digestion system and, therefore, the volume of food retained in the stomach.

Consider increasing the percentage of food that will actually help the functioning of your parent's elimination system.

#### **5. Problems with chewing**

If your parent has trouble chewing, he or she may have a [teeth or gum problem](#) or, if wearing dentures, the appliances may need to be adjusted. Advise your Mom or Dad's dentist about the chewing problem so that the specialist can check and correct the teeth, gums or dentures.

Chewing problems can often be resolved by eating softer foods. This can be resolved by replacing raw vegetables and fresh fruits with cooked vegetables or juices. Good nutrition can also be found in foods like applesauce and canned peaches or other fruits.

Ground or shredded meats are typically easy to chew or, in lieu of meat, consider soft foods such as cooked, dry beans, eggs, tofu, tuna fish and such.

#### **6. Dining alone**

A meal is often enjoyed more when the event is shared with another person or a group.

Try to share at least one of the meals each day with your parent so you can visit, talk about a new or adjusted recipe, or discuss events and outings.

Recruit other family members, friends and neighbors to join Mom or Dad regularly for lunch or dinner. Recommend that they visit with your parent on any subject other than illness or limitation, and that they ask questions to help Mom or Dad retain and even [expand mental agility and ability](#). Anticipating the visit will surely entice your parent the dining table.

Research local "meal events," such as lunch at the Senior Center. The meal will be healthy, and your parent can visit with other mature adults in a communal setting. Your local Area Agency on Aging can provide the sites and contact information, plus if volunteer drivers or specialized transit services are available for transportation.

#### **7. Lack of knowledge/motivation**

Draw Mom or Dad into the plan: "Mom/Dad, if we can make sure

you have proper nutrition, we can reduce the side effects of your medication; we can help your medications work better; you will probably feel better; plus we can celebrate our mutual life together for far longer. Will you buy into the best plan?"

If your parent understands the vital role of nutrition in her or his life, and agrees with the approach, you have a partner for all the right reasons.

In this step, offer a positive comment at least once each day to your parent that "with your proper nutrition, we have taken another giant step forward in your health and independence."

### **8. Monotony**

When your parent adheres to your daily healthful nutrition program, treat her or him to lunch or dinner in a restaurant to enhance the dining experience. The meal will probably be prepared and seasoned differently than your own recipe. Continue to focus on the healthy foods in the diet program.

Dining out will also give you a break from your kitchen chores.

### **9. Unwillingness to cook**

If you can't prepare all the meals, call for help. There may be a Meals on Wheels program for homebound older adults available in your community. This program prepares hot and healthy dishes that conform to the National Institutes of Health nutrition guidelines, and delivers them daily. Your local Area Agency on Aging will have details and contact information.

An alternative, particularly if your parent lives elsewhere in the country, is to order five to seven fresh gourmet quality meals per week delivered to Mom or Dad by a firm such as Magic Kitchen. Each week the company delivers the flash frozen meals in a single shipment for your parent or helper to stash in the freezer, to be withdrawn one each day. Your parent then only needs to heat the meal as recommended, and then dine in style.

The average meal program cost ranges from \$58 per week for seven daily meals, to \$116 per week for two meals each day. Pricing could be higher depending on your selection of side dishes and/or desserts.

### **10. The last resort if Mom or Dad still won't eat**

Proper nutrition is vital for your parent. If all of the above fail to work, seek the counsel of your parent's physician. Forced feeding may be the only alternative, and the doctor may direct your parent to a hospital for forced feeding combined with examinations to determine if he or she has any physical reason for declining food, and then treating or correcting the cause.

As caregiver, your nutrition mission is important. You can, indeed, ensure that your Mom or Dad is in the best possible and functional health.

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## Related Links

### [Magic Kitchen](#)

Gourmet, prepared meals for seniors, delivered to their door.

### [National Institutes of Health/National Institute on Aging](#)

Access a detailed and updated 51-page report on senior health, then scroll down to Eating Well as You Get Older link.

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*Leonard J. Hansen is the nation's pioneer in writing and editing for and about mature adults. He has received 106 professional awards and fellowships for his creative work. Access his website at [www.lenhansen.com](http://www.lenhansen.com).*

## Comments (1 to 10 of 10)

<b>PCVS</b> Jul 9, 2008	This is, of late exactly the problem my mother is having. Things that she used to like the taste of, she no longer does. She's shrinking and it's scary.
<b>alzheimersideas</b> Jul 9, 2008	<p>Not mentioned is a serious medical problem. They should be checked out by a physician. You should call before the visit to explain the situation. Because of HIPPA, you may not be given a lot of information unless you are the health care proxy or they give permission for their medical information be shared with you.</p> <p>Assuming there is no medical problem, certain supplements like ensure and boost have ingredients that may make your loved one nauseas thus he/she will not drink it. Iron is in many of these supplements. This has been know to make folks nauseas.</p> <p>Also some of the supplements give a person louse bowel movements. Sometimes the supplements cause a loved one to loose control of their bowels. This will stop them from taking supplements as well.</p> <p>Occasionally, supplements decrease appetite.</p> <p>There is definitely a lot to think about</p> <p>Therefore follow the tips listed before supplements are necessary.</p>
<b>PCVS</b> Jul 9, 2008	Well, I have started her on a morning shake which she has liked the two times I offered it. I add a protied powder, banana,milk, filtered water, other fruit as we have it. I'm thinking about adding more fiber to her diet because while she has always loved salads, of late she has mostly not wanted them. I wonder if the

poor air quality and high heat (we don't have any AC) might also be adversely affecting her.

**alzheimersideas**

Jul 9, 2008

Heat could definitely be a problem. It sounds like your shake is nutritiious. Sometimes bananas can constipate people.

**bellinghamone**

Jul 9, 2008

[cvs:  
Have you considered the heart-to-heart visit with your mother about the vital role of proper nutrition to make her medicines work better and reduce side effects. If you do this, also ask about her currently favorite foods, stating that you will find a way to work them in to the menu planning. If Mom is part of the solution the probability of her new acceptance of what you prepare and serve is very good.

Yes, I agree that heat can be a deterrent to proper nutrition. As you don't have air conditioning, consider buying a small fan that you can direct specifically to the locality around your mother. Also, if there is a breeze outside, open the window that can catch the airflow plus the window on the other side of the room or unit so the airflow can escape. You may have to buy screens for the windows, but such is a one-time purchase.

Also, consider some form of daily physical activity, even an event as simple as a walk around the block or to a nearby grocery store, can help produce an appetite as well as be beneficial to Mom's physical condition, dexterity and strength.

Good luck. I commend you as a concerned caregiver.

Leonard J. Hansen  
Author of this feature

**PCVS**

Jul 9, 2008

Thank you for all the advice. We have some fans and I do try to have them going but she has a tendency to turn them off. Thankfully, when there are breezes we can open some windows. Exercise I am not pushing for til the air quality improves, (she has asthema). But all these together are terrific advice and I will be sure to talk to her about it all, especially the nutrition aspect as that has always been an important subject for her.

Thank you again!

:)

<b>alzheimersideas</b> Jul 10, 2008	One other thing that might help, Add protein powder to jello when you make it. Of course this will only work if she likes jello. You could add fruit to the jello as well Susan
<b>Brandy</b> Jul 10, 2008	Force feeding? It seems not eating is a vote from the parent. I wonder if other cultures think force feeding of seniors is the answer to anything? Talk about human dignity...who is the force feeding for? The senior or the family!
<b>PCVS</b> Jul 10, 2008	No one said anything about force feeding. But when someone is losing their appetite her support structure should be aware enough to find out why and to try to remedy this - especially if the person is losing weight she can
<b>Brandy</b> Jul 10, 2008	<p>Read the article. Last paragraph's topic #10 - consider force feeding. I think the person who suggested this should try forced feeding on themselves. If it was going to be of short duration maybe try it. If not, why argue with nature?</p> <p>My own father decided to stop eating after a year of extreme suffering, struggling valiantly with terminal cancer. His heart was still going strong. We respected him enough to honor his wishes. He died fairly peacefully about two weeks later.</p>