 Cooking for Carers

Food on the go

Eating well is of course important for everyone’s wellbeing, loved ones and carers alike. Good nutrition and a balanced diet can boost our physical health, energy levels, immunity, concentration and even mood (see more on this at [Food and mental health - Mind)](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/food-and-mental-health/).

It can be easier said than done though in the often busy, fatiguing role of caring for someone and juggling life. Here are some ideas that may be useful:

**Batch cooking** – If you have freezer space this can be such a helpful way to get healthy home-cooked food regularly. Batch cooking doesn’t have to mean making 10 portions at once, which can be too time-consuming or feel overwhelming. It can also be that when you are about to make one or two portions, consider if you have enough ingredients for a third portion.

**Frozen / dried veg** – Have staple meal constituents already prepared for you; buy bags of frozen sliced onions, frozen sofrito (chopped onion, carrot and celery), or mixed veg such as individual portion of frozen packets of runner beans, peas, cauliflower and carrots (e.g. Birds Eye Steamfresh) that are microwavable in a few minutes. Dried onions will reconstitute in cooking. Peeled potatoes freeze well for using when you need them.

**Carbs from the cupboard** – Noodles or couscous sachets that take a few minutes to prepare with boiling water and a knob of butter. Microwaveable rice, which comes in all sorts of flavours and is ready to eat in two minutes, many are now moving towards whole meals e.g. Mexican rice includes beans, spices and sweetcorn. Grains like semolina can be a useful base because there is not much flavour, and you can turn to sweet or savoury dishes.

**Pick-up protein** – Go for quicker to cook protein sources such as scrambled or boiled eggs, prawns, grated bagged cheese, chopped ready to eat chicken, sliced cooked ham, all can be easily added into recipes.

**Ready meals** – It can be useful to have something you quickly bung in the microwave or oven. Supermarkets tend to stock different ranges, and many are vying for the ‘healthy’ label, so ingredients have greatly improved since they were first available. PSPA carers recommend ‘Cook’ or ‘Charlie Bighams’ as the closest to homemade.

**Eating mindfully** – Slow down if you can, taste, savour and enjoy your food. Hopefully you’ll be sitting while eating and sometimes this can constitute a bit of a break. If your loved one takes a long time to eat, you could keep both your food hot for longer with heated bowls and plates, look up ‘Keep Warm Plates’ or ‘Keep Warm Bowls’ online to see the variety on offer.

**Snacks** – Have snacks ready, maybe a cereal or protein bar in your bag or things you can reach for. If you crave sugar, you likely need energy, after all, our bodies alter food to glucose once we’ve eaten anyway. Take a few minutes to reflect on what makes you feel good, keeps you going and how you could have what you need available. Complex carbs like oats have a good reputation and there is a great deal of information available to help try looking at the British Heart Foundation [10 quick and easy healthy snack ideas - BHF](https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/heart-matters-magazine/nutrition/weight/100-calorie-snacks) or NHS pages [Healthier snacks - Food facts - Healthier Families - NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/healthier-families/food-facts/healthier-snacks/#homemade-snacks)

**Remember to drink** – Dehydration is the number one reason we can develop headaches. Keep a bottle or flask to hand, perhaps putting it together in the morning so you have it in reach for the day.

**Food ruts** – It is easy to get into a food ‘rut’ rotating the same meals, which you might like very much, and they can make shopping and preparing easier, but is there something you haven’t tried for ages that you miss, which wouldn’t be so hard to have again to makes things more interesting.

**Menu planning** – Some carers and loved ones are able to do this together and make it a bit of a hobby with themed meals, coming up with ideas for what to eat or snacks to take into the care home, old favourites that don’t come up on the menu.

**As an Insurance Policy** – Consider taking a one-a-day vitamin / mineral tablet.

**Dealing with anxieties** – Mealtimes can be fraught points of the day, with worries about your loved one chocking, coughing, swallowing, stuffing food in, not eating enough etc. This can put our minds and bodies into the tense ‘flight or fight response’, with extra adrenalin released because our brain has translated there is something to fear and wants us to be ready so sends out that signal via stress hormones, making us feel more on edge.

Adapting meals for your loved one

Of course, many with PSP and CBD do or will experience difficulties with swallowing.

The International Dysphasia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI) is the categorisation NHS services, care homes, dieticians and speech and language therapists refer to, with the numbering system 0-7.

* Level 0 Thin
* Level 1 Slightly Thick
* Level 2 Mildly Thick
* Level 3 Moderately Thick
* Level 3 Liquidised
* Level 4 Extremely Thick
* Level 4 Pureed
* Level 5 Minced and Moist
* Level 6 Soft and Bite sized
* Level 7 Easy to chew
* Level 7 Regular

The IDDSI provide information, examples and ideas for every level on this website page: [Patient Handouts - Resources - IDDSI](https://www.iddsi.org/resources/patient-handouts)

Suggestions from carers to carers

**Air Fryers** – Speeds up cooking time, can use multiple drawers for producing whole meals and set timers for different levels so everything is ready together. Packaging often includes air fryer cooking times now. Can help save on energy bills. And they are dishwasher friendly, meaning you never need to clean your oven again!

**Slow-cookers** – Put all your ingredients in and leave to cook during the day. Excellent for stews, casseroles, and tenderising meat and root vegetables. Likewise, **pressure cookers** can work in much the same way.

**Make soups** – Good to adapt to smoother consistency by pureeing in blenders or by mash down bigger pieces. Can use up lots of veg that is hanging around, add herbs, stock pots or cubes to make lots of tasty vitamin and mineral-packed variations.

**Smoothies** – Same principle as for soup, you can adjust the consistency. Try frozen bags of berries, tropical or orchard fruits, add coconut milk or banana for a creamy flavour. If you are using fruit purees, you can use jars too.

**Nutribullets** – Are a type of quick blender that can be used for soups, smoothies, and dips like hummus.

**Bonsen Kitchen Hand Blender** – Good for whizzing down any meal into the desired consistency. The detachable stainless steel ‘stick’ makes this an easier clean than a bladed blender where you need to keep the electrical parts out of the sink. You can also get other attachments that can chop or whisk.

**Pineapple juice** – Contains the enzyme bromelain that helps to thin mucus and has anti-inflammatory properties, both can assist with swallowing.

**Cramming** – Some may experience impulsive behaviour such as cramming food into the mouth where it can build up and not be consumed. Try swapping to smaller cutlery or portions. You could also pace meals into a couple of ‘courses’ instead of presenting food as a single meal.

**Motivational Water Bottles** – With markers (and sometimes encouragement) written on the side of the bottle indicating how much you should drink by different periods through the day.

**Recipe Books** – Get some guidance and or inspiration, Jamie Oliver has been suggested a number of times in PSPA carers groups, with books such as ‘5 Ingredients’ or ‘30 Minute Meals’.

**Metal Straws** – Reuseable, portable, collapsable drinking straws with case and cleaning brush from the ‘KynUp’ brand or similar.

**‘The Everything Sauce’** - Such as from Marks & Spencer’s, a classic tomato-based sauce for pasta, pizza bases, shepherd’s pies etc.

**Adaptive Cutlery/Crockery** – From high-sided plates to curved forks and non-slip matting, there is much on the market aimed at assisting people with eating. For independent reviews, go to the Disability Living Foundation’s site [Living Made Easy - Rehabilitation](https://livingmadeeasy.org.uk/category/category/health-and-personal-care/rehabilitation) and choose ‘eating and drinking’ from the drop-down list.

**Drinking Cups** – Mugs and cups that deliver a measured amount, are non-spill with one-way values or can only work if someone if sucking through the straw were all recommended. Looking up with the term ‘sippy cup for adults’ produces lots of options online, add in more details such as insulated or double-handled to find what you want.

**Presentation** – The look of food is important for encouraging appetite, especially when eating can be hard work.

**Save time & effort** - Where possible, if you are cooking for two, it might save time and effort to use the same ingredients, even though they might need to be in different forms.

Other resources

**Second Nature** - [Second Nature in the NHS](https://www.secondnature.io/nhs-and-partnerships) Evidence-based services to support physical activity, pre-diabetes, type II diabetes, nutrition, weight loss and mental health.

**Community Kitchens** – See if there is one in your area and what they might do for carers. For example, in East Sussex there is an initiative to support carers with meals and trying out new ideas: [Cooking for Carers – Community Chef](https://communitychef.org.uk/cooking-for-carers-new%EF%BF%BC/)

**Cooking for carers** – Check your local carers association for resources or sessions for you on topics like nutrition, mindful eating etc.