# Sudden changes in eating habits may signal early dementia, experts warn



Bizarre shifts in dietary preferences—such as a long-time vegetarian developing a sudden craving for meat—may be an overlooked indicator of dementia, according to experts. In a TikTok clip that garnered nearly 30,000 views, Dr Kellyn Lee, a dementia specialist at the University of Southampton, highlighted how changes in eating habits can astound family and friends. “When we think about food, quite often we have known that person for a long time,” she noted. “But when the brain isn’t working as it used to… tastes change.”

Dr Lee elaborated on this phenomenon, describing how familiar foods can suddenly become unappealing. A person who once enjoyed fish and chips might turn their nose up at them, while someone with a longstanding fondness for roast beef may unexpectedly refuse to eat it. These drastic shifts can stem from altered perceptions of taste and texture, leaving loved ones in disbelief.

This concerning trend is particularly pronounced in cases of frontotemporal dementia (FTD), a condition that affects younger individuals, often under the age of 65. The Alzheimer’s Society reports that while FTD accounts for only two per cent of dementia cases in the UK, it emerges in about twelve per cent of early-onset dementia cases. Symptoms can include an increased appetite and even behaviours such as binge eating, distinguishing FTD from Alzheimer’s disease, which primarily disrupts memory.

The social ramifications of such changes can be severe, with families forced to grapple with a loved one’s evolving dietary needs. Many caregivers report distressing experiences, as illustrated by personal accounts shared online. One user reminisced about her mother, a vegetarian for 35 years, who now consumes meat after being diagnosed with FTD. Another mentioned their partner experiencing unusual sensations while eating, complicating meal preparation.

Dr Lee also pointed out that those with dementia often forget they have recently eaten, leading to repeated requests for food. This can create anxiety for both the individual and their caregivers, prompting conflicts during mealtime. The expert advocates for distraction techniques, advising caregivers to focus attention away from food, thereby alleviating stress related to meals. Activities such as playing music can serve to redirect the individual’s thoughts, offering a moment of respite from the confusion surrounding their dietary habits.

Currently, approximately 944,000 individuals in the UK live with dementia, with this number projected to soar to 1.7 million within the next two decades due to an ageing population. This rise poses significant economic burdens; a recent analysis estimated that the annual cost of dementia in the UK is around £42 billion, anticipated to inflate to £90 billion over the next 15 years. This includes not only healthcare costs but also lost earnings for unpaid caregivers.

It is imperative to recognise and support the dietary changes associated with dementia. The Alzheimer’s Society highlights that these shifts can result from varied factors, including altered taste perceptions and cognitive decline. Similarly, a report by Dementia Australia underlined that individuals may develop cravings for unhealthy foods, such as those high in sugar or salt, complicating nutritional management. Experts stress the importance of structured meal planning, encouraging regular social interactions during mealtimes, and ensuring hydration to support individuals with dementia in maintaining healthy eating habits.

Additionally, the British Dietetic Association points out that as dementia progresses, the ability to eat and drink can become increasingly challenging, compounded by issues like poor motor control and social embarrassment. They recommend understanding these factors to provide effective support and prevent malnutrition, which is a significant risk in this population.

Amid these changes, it remains paramount for caregivers to be informed and adaptable. Awareness of how dementia can alter eating habits not only improves the quality of life for those affected, but also alleviates some of the emotional burdens faced by families and caregivers. By fostering a compassionate understanding of these shifts, the journey through the complexities of dementia can be navigated with greater empathy and support.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14730665/Sudden-diet-cravings-changes-dementia-symptom-early.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/daily-living/changes-eating-habits-food-preference> - This article from the Alzheimer's Society discusses how individuals with dementia may experience changes in their eating habits and food preferences. It highlights that people with dementia can develop new likes or dislikes, such as a lifelong vegetarian suddenly craving meat. The piece emphasizes that these changes can be due to altered taste and smell perceptions, memory issues, or other cognitive changes associated with dementia. It also provides guidance on how caregivers can support individuals experiencing these changes.
3. <https://www.dementia.org.au/living-dementia/home-life/eating-and-dementia> - Dementia Australia provides insights into how dementia affects eating and drinking habits. The article notes that individuals with dementia might lose their appetite, forget to eat or drink, or develop cravings for salty or sugary foods. It also mentions that dementia can alter the way someone experiences flavor, leading to a preference for comfort foods. The piece offers practical advice for caregivers, such as planning meals as social occasions and encouraging regular hydration, to support those with dementia in maintaining healthy eating habits.
4. <https://www.dementiauk.org/information-and-support/health-advice/eating-and-drinking/> - Dementia UK discusses the impact of dementia on appetite and the ability to eat and drink. The article explains that people with dementia may forget to eat or drink, not recognize when they are hungry or full, or have trouble preparing food. It also covers changes in taste and smell, which can lead to altered food preferences. The piece provides advice on how to help, including offering meals at regular times, encouraging physical activity, and providing balanced meals to avoid constipation.
5. <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/eating-and-drinking-difficulties-in-dementia.html> - The British Dietetic Association outlines the eating and drinking difficulties faced by individuals with dementia. The article highlights that as dementia progresses, cognitive, behavioral, and physical changes can make eating and drinking increasingly challenging. It discusses issues such as taste and smell changes, poor appetite, difficulty in shopping and preparing food, and swallowing and chewing difficulties. The piece emphasizes the importance of understanding these challenges to provide appropriate support and prevent malnutrition.
6. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/dementia-patient-not-eating> - Medical News Today explores the causes and management of appetite loss in dementia patients. The article identifies several reasons for reduced appetite, including difficulties with chewing and swallowing due to motor control issues, depression, and discomfort from dental problems. It also discusses how fatigue, constipation, and minimal physical activity can contribute to appetite loss. The piece emphasizes the importance of addressing these factors to ensure proper nutrition and overall health in individuals with dementia.
7. <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/dementia-eating> - Better Health Channel provides information on how dementia affects eating habits. The article notes that individuals with dementia may forget how to chew and swallow, leading to a loss of appetite. It also mentions that ill-fitting dentures, insufficient physical activity, and embarrassment about eating difficulties can contribute to reduced food intake. The piece offers strategies to manage loss of appetite, such as offering meals at regular times, encouraging physical activity, and providing balanced meals to avoid constipation.