

# Eating and ALS

As ALS progresses, you may notice changes in your ability to chew, swallow, or feed yourself. If this becomes a concern, reach out to your ALS clinic or medical team for guidance. Your speech language pathologist (SLP), occupational therapist (OT), and dietitian can help you find ways to eat safely and more independently while maintaining your weight.

## ALS Food Safety and Modification

The type of food and liquid you consume and how it is prepared will play a big role in your ability to stay safe while eating and drinking. Finding out what works for you at each stage of the disease may be a process of trial and error.

If you find yourself choking on thin liquids like water, tucking your chin while taking one sip at a time may solve the problem. If you are still choking, you can try thicker liquids like smoothies and nectars. If chewing is becoming difficult or you are having trouble swallowing, try eating softer food and cutting it up into smaller pieces. Try to avoid foods that are difficult to swallow and food that could get stuck and block your airway. Adding sauces and gravies to food can help it go down more easily. And while keeping safety in mind, try to find ways to keep your meals tasty and enjoyable. Ask your SLP or dietitian about ALS-friendly recipes and other food preparation tips.

## Getting the Calories You Need

People living with ALS often struggle to consume enough calories to maintain their regular weight. Daily activities require more energy and calories than before, and when eating becomes more challenging, people tend to consume fewer calories. The resulting weight loss can lead to accelerated muscle deterioration, weakness, low energy, and other issues.

If you are struggling to maintain your weight, your dietitian will likely suggest ways to increase your caloric intake without eating a significantly larger amount of food each day. This can be done by eating high-protein foods, consuming more healthy fats such as avocados and olive oil, and adding high-calorie items like butter, sugar, honey, and whole milk to your meals.

## Staying Hydrated

People living with ALS can also struggle to consume enough liquid. Staying hydrated is critical to staying healthy and avoiding dehydration symptoms such as constipation, weakness, headaches, and thicker saliva, which can make swallowing more difficult.



It is important to develop a system to make water accessible whenever you feel thirsty. There are a variety of assistive devices that can help, such as lightweight cups with one or two handles, strap-on universal drink holders, and one-way-valve straws.

## Eating Independently

Using assistive devices to get food to your mouth can help you continue to eat independently. Your OT can assess your challenges and propose devices like utensils with wide grips, universal cuffs that hold utensils, scoop dishes, and rocker knives. There is even a robotic feeding device that can be controlled by any part of the body (hand, head, foot, breath, etc.) that can activate an accessibility switch.

Eating and drinking devices are not usually covered by insurance. However, you can ask your ALS clinic if they have any you can borrow or you can apply for the Care Grant with ALS United NC to cover the expense. You can also visit the ALS Equipment Guide ([www.youralsguide.com/als-equipment-guide](http://www.youralsguide.com/als-equipment-guide)) to learn more and purchase devices directly.

## Getting Nutrition through a Feeding Tube

If you are still having trouble eating or swallowing, are getting overly fatigued while eating, or are losing weight, it may be time to consider receiving some or all of your nutrition and hydration through a feeding tube. A feeding tube involves a short surgical procedure followed by training from a dietitian.

A feeding tube can help ensure that you are well nourished, well hydrated, and don't lose any more weight. You can still enjoy tasting food by mouth whenever you like, but your main source of nutrition will come from your feeding tube. If pills and vitamins are hard to swallow, you can get some medications in liquid form or crush and administer them through the feeding tube as long as they are crushable.

### Get Local Support



ALS United North Carolina  
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