Dementia is an umbrella term for a large group of conditions that cause a progressive decline in a person's functioning. Sometimes people with dementia will refuse to eat food, or not eat enough, because of lack of appetite, problems chewing and/or swallowing, memory loss, or confusion. It is often very difficult for carers to get people with dementia to take in enough calories to keep them healthy. People with dementia often wander, which means they need to take in enough energy through food and drinks to account for this or they can suffer from malnutrition and/or weight loss.

We reviewed 15 articles (published from 1995 to 2008) from a wide range of sources to find evidence about using oral liquid nutritional supplements to help people with dementia in residential aged care to maintain an adequate calorie intake and prevent weight loss and malnutrition. Some of the articles were reports from research studies and others were opinion papers by experts in the field. The evidence found was low to moderate quality, which does not mean the findings are incorrect, only that more studies of a higher quality research design are still needed to support them.

These supplements are usually prescribed by physicians, and less often by dieticians. They are usually prescribed to treat weight loss and/or poor intake of food, by increasing the resident’s protein and energy intake. Oral liquid nutritional supplements are generally given from one to four times a day, depending on the needs of the resident. They come in the form of high-calorie, high-protein, milk or juice-based drinks. The drinks are given in doses varying from 30ml to 250ml, depending on the requirements of the resident and the amount of protein and calories in the particular drink. They generally come in cans or tetra-brick cartons, and it may be helpful to decant the drink into a cup suitable for the person with dementia to use.

Sometimes oral liquid nutritional supplements given to residents are not consumed. One reason for this may be that residents do not receive the physical assistance they need to manage the cup or container. Another reason may be that the supplement is given with a meal and the resident cannot consume both the drink and the meal in the same sitting. Between-meal supplements were recommended by some studies. Other studies found it helpful for supplement drinks to be given at the same time as the resident’s regular medications, as this may lower the amount being wasted.

There is some evidence that supplement drinks can help stop unwanted weight loss in people with dementia and improve their nutrition. There is some suggestion that adequate protein and calorie intake may slow the decline of mental functioning in people with dementia. No evidence was found to show that using oral liquid nutritional supplements put people with dementia at any increased risk of illness or injury.