

## **Eating**

Most ALS patients either have or will have difficulty eating and drinking, secondary to mouth and swallowing muscle weakness. ALS patients with difficulty chewing and swallowing are advised to make changes in their dietary consistency; thin liquids, foods with two different consistencies like a vegetable soup, and dry and/or tough to chew foods are to be avoided. It is recommended that upon noticing the first signs of swallowing problems you consult a Speech Pathologist/Therapist to be evaluated and receive instruction in safe swallowing techniques. Other related eating difficulties are a result of a weakened hand, arm and shoulder muscles. Many adaptive devices and techniques are available. Consulting an Occupational Therapist trained in assessing a patient's ability and recommending environmental modifications and assistive equipment is typically worthwhile.

### **Thick-It**

Thick It is an instant food thickener for adding a thicker consistency to foods. It will thicken hot or cold, thin or thick liquids and pureed food to any desired consistency quickly, easily and controllably. Simply add the desired amount while stirring briskly and wait 30 seconds for food or liquids to thicken. Depending upon the amount of product you use, you can arrive at nectar, honey or pudding consistencies. Thicken everything from fruit juices to carbonated beverages to milk to drink mixes (like ensure), to tea, coffee, lemonade, broth and pureed vegetables. Thick-It should be available at your local drug store.

### **Eating Utensils**

Holding conventional utensils can become difficult for ALS patients due to hand and finger weakness. Common solutions include building up the handles of existing utensils using rubber based cylindrical foam available from medical suppliers. Alternately, utensils with large diameter handles which are specially weighted and balanced are available. Good grips is a brand ALS patients have reportedly had good experience with. A variety of utensils are available and many include a special shaft that allows them to be easily bent for right or left hand use. Special knives are available which enable cutting via a rocking motion and require minimal strength. These knives are specially designed to use with one hand. Elastic straps called universal cuffs, are also available for those with extremely limited grip. These items can be found at most Durable Medical Equipment companies, including Sammons-Preston.

## **Dishes**

Plates are available with non-skid bottoms and raised edges. These plates are non-breakable and eliminate difficulty with chasing the plate around the table and with pushing food off the edge of the plate. Partitioned plates are also available allowing for separation of different foods. Food guards which fit onto standard plates to provide a raised edge to push food against are also available. Cups are available with both single and double handles which make them easier to lift. They are non-breakable and available with spouted lids which minimize spillage. It is important (if you use a microwave) to verify that dishes you consider are microwave safe as many are made of melamine and should not be put in a microwave. Again, these items may be purchased at a Medical Supply store.

## **Straws**

When the ALS patient is no longer able to lift a drink, drinking straws become indispensable. Straws are also helpful in enabling you to drink with your chin down which helps prevent choking and aspiration. Straws are readily available in bulk from Costco or restaurant suppliers. Slightly larger diameter straws may be easier to use and clear straws allow you to see what you are drinking as it comes up the straw.

Providing proximal support to the shoulder by raising it with blankets, pillows, books or other support objects under the elbow can improve the ability to self feed. This technique eliminates the need to use a weak shoulder while engaging in self feeding activities. It is also very helpful to raise the level of the food to that of the mouth. The combination of an elevated elbow and food level allows the person with ALS to eat using available elbow strength without as much interference from gravity. This technique can be used in conjunction with built up handled utensils to adapt for a weak grip.