

## Dementia: Tips for everyday living

Dementia is the name given to the broad range of symptoms resulting from illnesses that cause degenerative intellectual functioning.

The onset and symptoms present differently in each situation, and may range from confusion, memory loss and disorientation, to the reduced ability to finish thoughts or follow directions. For some people, their dementia may also be combined with decreased mobility, loss of balance and problems with coordination.

As the disease progresses, the person may struggle to perform familiar tasks, remember recent events, or understand and recognise potential problems and solutions.

For those living with a person with dementia it can be a confusing and scary time. However, there are some simple ideas that can help make everyday activities easier.

## Personal care

It is not uncommon for someone with dementia to experience a decrease in their personal hygiene. This may be due to problems with fine and/or gross motor functioning or perhaps increasing forgetfulness about how to wash or get changed. Sometimes it is hard for the person to remember the order in which clothes should be put on, or even which piece of clothing belongs on which body part.

Suggestions for managing these changes include the following.

## Dressing

Label drawers so items can be easily located (for example, with a picture of a sock).

- Lay out clothes in the order in which they need to be put on.
- If changing clothes is an issue, remove the dirty clothes and replace them with a clean set while the person is in the shower. Consider buying a couple of the same outfits to use interchangeably.
- Consider buying some adaptive clothing such as slip on shoes, pull on bras, wrap around tops/skirts and trousers with easy to manage fastenings such as hook and loop Velcro tape or elastic rather than buttons.
- Avoid having daytime clothing visible at night-time as this may cause confusion.
- Choice is important, but too many options can be confusing. Offer limited suggestions, for example, "Would you like to wear the blue shirt or the white shirt?"

## Hygiene

- Lay out soap, facecloth, towel, toothbrush, etc, in the order they are to be used.
- Check the water temperature, because the person's ability to discriminate between hot and cold may be impaired.
- Ensure the bathroom is well set up with grab rails, shower chairs, non slip flooring, and other safety features.
- Remove the locks from the toilet and bathroom doors to avoid anyone becoming locked inside.
- If the person has trouble cutting their nails and washing their hair, book a regular appointment with a podiatrist

and hairdresser. Some of these services will come out to your home.

- Put reminder notes on the back of doors, for example, “Have you remembered to wash your hands?”.
- Put picture cues on the doors of the toilet/bathroom to identify what is inside.

## Mealtime

People with dementia may lose interest in food or experience difficulties with eating. Initially this may be due to feelings of depression associated with their diagnosis, but over time other problems may present themselves. These include safety issues such as leaving the stove on, forgetting when to eat, confusion about eating utensils and/or what to do with food placed in front of them.

Some suggestions for managing these situations include:

- Remind the person that it is mealtime via a phone call, alarm clock or note left around the house.
- Leave frozen meals in the freezer with reminder instructions on when to eat them and how to defrost them.
- If cooking is no longer a safe option, consider home delivered meal services.
- If overeating is an issue, hide food that you do not want eaten and replace snack foods with healthy alternatives.
- If it becomes difficult for the person to use standard utensils consider buying some adaptive cutlery, non-slip placemats, two handled mugs, or non spill feeder cups.
- Plate guards and finger food can help eliminate the need to use a knife.

- If the person needs a long time to eat their meals, insulated plates can help to keep the food warm and appetising.
- It is important to keep table settings simple—avoid clutter as it may cause confusion. A contrast placemat can also be helpful.
- Eating together can help provide useful cues on how to use utensils, cups and so on.

## Communication

People with dementia may experience difficulties finding the right words to use in conversation and the ability to understand and interpret what others are saying may also be impaired. Reading and writing skills may also be affected.

Suggestions include:

- Be aware of the importance of body language—use hand gestures and facial expressions.
- Keep sentences short and simple.
- Use orientating/descriptive words (for example, ‘Your daughter, Mary’).
- Try to eliminate competing and distracting noises such as the TV or other people talking.
- Ensure continuity throughout interactions. Use the same instructions or description every time you are in the same situation.
- Be patient. Allow time for the person to find the word they want or to express their wishes.

## General tips

- Eliminate the need to keep track of a diary by using a large, central notice

- board where appointments and reminders can be written up.
- Write important phone numbers on the wall beside the phone so they cannot get misplaced or consider a phone that uses pictures of family members as the memory function.
- Make life simpler by taking advantage of automatic bill pay and fund transfers.
- Use clocks with large displays showing the day and date as well as the time.
- Using earplugs for visits to noisy places (for example, shopping centres) can help reduce distress.
- Make use of lists or cue cards (for example, put a card on the front door saying: 'Mrs Jones, have you remembered to collect your keys?')
- Contact My Aged Care to arrange an assessment for services which can include meal management & personal care
- Allow more time, break activities down into smaller steps, and give instructions one step at a time.
- Eliminating visual and audio clutter so the person can concentrate on the task.
- Sticking with familiar routines—too much changes may increase confusion.
- Respecting a person's choice—even if it seems unusual.
- Focusing on what someone can do, rather than what they cannot.

Finally, it's important to remember that there are others in the community who may be dealing with a similar situation. Agencies such as Dementia Australia are set up to provide information, education and counselling and support.

## Dementia Australia

National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500

<https://www.dementia.org.au/>

## Staying Involved

Even in the advanced stages of dementia, people may still be able to help with tasks around the home. This can be a significant way of building the person's self esteem and providing a sense of achievement.

You can help by:

- Introducing new equipment, techniques and routines during the early stages of the illness.
- Realising that although everyday tasks may take a little bit longer, it is important not to take over just because it will get the job done faster.

## Contacting the Independent Living Centre SA

The Independent Living Centre SA offers free advice on equipment and techniques to help you with everyday tasks. **Ph: 1800 445 272**

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