

Staying healthy

If you are caring for a person with dementia you will want to ensure that they remain as healthy as possible. The better the person feels the more enjoyment they are likely to get and the easier it will be for both of you to manage.

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General Health

Checkups

You can ask the person's GP to do a general health check if you are worried about their health or if it would simply put your mind at rest. If you have a different GP from the person with dementia introduce yourself as the person's caregiver. If there is an area of particular concern, such as high blood pressure or diabetes, make sure that these are checked regularly at the doctor's surgery.



Eyes, ears and teeth

It is also a good idea to check all other relevant aspects of the health of the person, such as their eyes, ears and teeth. This should be done as soon as possible after diagnosis while:

- The person is still able to give information about themselves.
- The person is more able to adjust to any changes that may be needed, such as new glasses, a different hearing aid or new dentures.

Future checkups will also be easier if the professional concerned has been able to establish a relationship with the person at an early stage.

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Medication

In general, the fewer drugs the person has to take the better, both for their dementia and their general health. This includes prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

- As soon as possible after diagnosis check with the GP to make sure that the person is not taking unnecessary drugs. People sometimes continue with repeat prescriptions longer than is needed.
- Drugs which have been prescribed to manage behaviour should be reviewed very regularly.
- Check too that they are taking the lowest possible effective dose of any drug that they need. Older people need smaller doses of drugs than younger people in many cases.
- Some drugs or combinations of drugs may increase the person's confusion or have other unwanted side effects. Always let the GP know if you suspect that this is happening.

You will need to find ways to ensure the person with dementia takes the right medication at the right time.

- If the person has only mild memory problems, the chemist may be able to help by providing a box with compartments labelled with the day and time for a whole week, or by providing tablets on a sheet with day and time labels.
- If memory problems are more severe you may have to supervise their medication in case they overlook a dose or taken an extra dose by mistake. Place medicines out of reach and out of sight as an extra precaution.

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Keeping a watchful eye

As dementia progresses it is quite common for the person to become less steady on their feet. They may be inclined to fall more easily or they may have other accidents. However, their memory problems may mean that they do not always tell you about these incidents. You will have to check discreetly on a regular basis for any cuts or bruises that may need attention.

Check also for rashes or sore places when you are helping the person to wash or dress. You need to be particularly vigilant for potential pressure sores if the person is no longer very active. If you do notice any red patches which do not go away after a few hours, contact the GP or community nurse as soon as possible.

Keeping warm

The person with dementia may not be aware or be able to tell you if they are feeling cold. You need to remember that being cold for any length of time is a risk to health and can be dangerous particularly among older people. A drop in body temperature to a dangerous level, known as hypothermia, results in a gradual physical and mental slowing down. If untreated, this can lead to a loss of consciousness and even death.

- Try to make sure that the rooms where the person sits and sleeps during the day are kept warm. Draught proofing and roof insulation will help.
- Layers of clothing are the best way of staying warm, particularly if the clothing is made of natural fibres such as wool.
- Encourage the person to wear a hat, gloves and warm socks if they go out in cold weather. This also applies indoors if it is impossible to heat the home sufficiently to keep warm.

Remember that the person may feel the cold far more than you do, their circulation may be poor if they are less active. However, they may be unable to tell you when they are cold.

Diet

An adequate and balanced diet is essential for good health. Eating too little or missing out on essential nutrients will reduce the person's resistance to illness and may also increase the degree of confusion.

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- The person may forget to eat if they are on their own. You may need to arrange for someone to be with them at mealtimes. After a certain point, having meals on wheels delivered is no longer appropriate because the person may forget to eat them or feed the meal to a pet.
- If the person refuses to eat the sort of food that you feel they need to keep healthy the GP may suggest alternatives or prescribe vitamins or other supplements.
- Eating high calorie and sweet foods is comforting. However, this can lead to considerable weight gain, which may lead to further health problems.
- If the person is eating so much they are making themselves uncomfortable, try tactfully to limit the amount of food available or offer low calorie foods as snacks.
- It is important that the person drinks enough fluids every day. Otherwise they may become dehydrated which is a health risk and can lead to greater confusion.

Constipation

This is a common problem among older and less active people. It can cause pain and discomfort and can also increase the person's confusion. Help to prevent constipation by:

- Offering plenty of high fibre foods such as cereals, wholemeal bread, fruit and vegetables.
- Ensuring the intake of fluids.
- Encouraging regular exercise

Such measures are better for the person's health than the regular use of laxatives. However, if problems persist, consult the GP.

Sleep

The person with dementia may become confused about night and day and may get up at night and get dressed, thinking it is morning. It is important for everyone to get a good night's rest wherever possible. It may help if you can:

- Try not to allow the person to take too many daytime naps by encouraging activities, providing stimulation and preventing boredom.
- Limit fluids in the evening and avoid stimulating drinks like tea and coffee.
- Encourage the person to take some form of exercise during the day.
- Find soothing and relaxing ways to encourage the person to sleep such as giving a warm milky drink at bedtime.

Smoking

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It is possible that the person may forget about smoking if cigarettes and ashtrays are removed from sight. However, trying to make them stop smoking may produce the opposite effect and make them more tense and irritable. There is also the question of the right of the person with dementia to continue to enjoy activities, which they have enjoyed in the past.

- A person's memory loss may mean an increased risk of fire so, if they wish to continue smoking, try to make it as safe as possible – for example, replace matches with disposable lighters.
- Install smoke detectors where they normally sit and smoke.

Alcohol

A drink in company may be a pleasant way for the person with dementia to relax. However you also need to be aware that:

- A person with dementia may appear more confused after a drink. The amount of alcohol consumed may need to be limited.
- Alcohol does not mix well with certain medicines. If in doubt ask the GP for advice.

If you are concerned about the person drinking too much because they have forgotten how much they have had, or about them drinking in inappropriate situations, you may wish to keep alcohol out of reach and out of sight. Again, the issue of the right of the person to enjoy a pleasurable activity has to be balanced against the risk.

Hearing

- Poor hearing can add to the person's confusion and feelings of isolation.
- If you think the person has a hearing problem, a GP can refer them for a hearing test.
- If they use a hearing aid make sure that it is switched on and working properly. As the dementia progresses the person may find that the hearing aid is too difficult to manage and simply adds to the confusion.
- You may need to attract the attention of the person before speaking to them. A touch on the arm will indicate where you are. Face them so that they can see you, and then speak slowly and clearly.
- If they do not understand you, try to alter the form of words you are using rather than repeating the same phrase more loudly. Make sure that there is no distracting noise such as television, radio or loud voices.

Sight

Problems with sight can also increase confusion and can make it harder for the person to recognize people or objects and may cause hallucinations in those with advanced dementia. Inform all medical practitioners that the patient suffers from dementia.

An optometrist can test the sight of a person with dementia. There are special techniques for assessing sight even for people in the late stages of dementia.

The optometrist should also check for cataract and glaucoma, both of which can lead to blindness if left untreated as well as for other medical conditions.

Tactfully remind the person to wear their glasses if necessary and check that the lenses are clean.

Teeth

Regular dental care is important to make sure that there are no problems with teeth or gums or with the way that dentures fit. Any pain or discomfort will distress the person and may lead to difficulties with eating and drinking, which in turn may increase confusion.

Encourage or help the person to clean their teeth or dentures regularly.

Let the dentist know at once if you notice any problems such as swollen gums, ulcers, broken teeth or missing fillings.

Poor dental hygiene can lead to infections and can also affect the ability to eat and digestion.

Feet

Healthy feet are essential if the person with dementia is to remain mobile and active. Check that their shoes fit well. Although slippers are comfortable they should not be worn for more than a few hours at a time, as they do not offer enough support to the feet.

Keep feet clean and dry and toenails cut short.

If the feet or any part of the foot becomes swollen or painful or there is a change in the colour of the skin, contact the GP as soon as possible.

If there are problems such as corns or in-growing toenails for example, have these treated.

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Extra special care needs to be taken of the feet if the person with dementia also has Diabetes.

Exercise

Regular exercise is good for health for the person with dementia.

It will enable them to remain mobile and independent for as long as possible.

It will improve circulation and help to prevent stiffness and muscle wasting.

It will help to feel well and sleep better.

It can help to reduce anxiety, stress and depression.

Look for some form of exercise that the person enjoys or ask your GP, occupational therapist or physio-therapist to advise.

Mobility

The more mobile the person remains the better it will be for their health and the easier it will be for you to manage. Look for ways to help the person to remain mobile.

If the person becomes unsteady on their feet, seek advice on aids and equipment that can be installed in the house such as grab rails, to enable them to move more safely.

The person may spend quite a lot of time sitting in a chair. If this is the case, a firm, comfortable chair that is easy for them to sit down in and get up from, is important.

If the person needs your support to move, learn how to do this so that neither of you are harmed.

Depression and anxiety

A certain amount of depression or anxiety is very common, particular in the early stages of dementia when the person is likely to be aware of their declining abilities.

If the person is able to talk about what is troubling them, listen and show that you are trying to understand their feelings. Do not brush their feelings aside or attempt to jolly them along.

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These feelings are very real. The person has a lot to be depressed and anxious about.

Offer affection, reassurance and support.

If you feel that the person is extremely depressed or anxious ask the GP for advice.

It is often easier to deal with this type of problem at an earlier stage.

Well-being

Feelings of well-being are an important aspect of good health. The person with dementia needs:

Affection and reassurance from you that they are still valued and that they do matter to you.

Freedom from as much outside stress as possible.

Appropriate activities and stimulation to enable them to remain alert and motivated for as long as possible.

Respect for their dignity.

Alzheimer's Society UK would like to thank Dr Rupert McShane, Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford, for help in preparing this advice sheet.

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