

Washing and bathing

For most adults washing is a personal, private activity. Carers need to show great sensitivity, tact and respect for the dignity of the other person when offering help. Try to imagine how you would feel in this situation. A flexible approach often works best. Here are some suggestions.

Encourage independence

- *Monitor ability for all stages of personal care.*
- *The person may like to have some assistance from you – for example, handing them the soap or towel.*
- *Let patient hold cloth or soap.*

Encourage the person to wash themselves for as long as possible.

- We all have our own routines for personal care, particularly when getting up in the morning.
- It is important to continue with these routines for as long as possible. It is worth taking a little time to analyse which routines work best. Where does the person prefer to get undressed? Do they prefer a bath or a shower? What toiletries are they used to? What dental care do they need?



- Monitor ability for all stages of personal care.
- Tactful reminders about steps in the process of personal hygiene may be helpful.
- The person may like to have some assistance from you – for example, handing them the soap or towel.

You will be aware of the preferences of the person you are caring for.

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Sensible precautions

- Check that the floor is not slippery. This is particularly important in bathrooms and kitchens. Put a non-slip mat in the bath or shower.
- Prepare the bathroom fully in advance
- Make sure that the room is warm before the person undresses, but don't put a heater in the bathroom. Remember that older people are more sensitive to heat and cold than younger people.
- Let patient hold cloth or soap
- Check that the water temperature of the bath or shower is not too hot or too cold. Turn the temperature of the hot water down at the geyser as a precaution. Patient might turn the hot tap on and be burned if temperature is too hot.
- Use less water if necessary
- It might be a good idea to remove locks from the bathroom door or to replace them with locks that can be opened from outside. Someone with dementia may lock themselves in and become panicky. Or they may go into the bathroom to wash and then forget why they went in.

General tips when helping someone

- Try to make the experience as pleasant and relaxed as possible.
- Ensure that everything is ready before you start.
- Use the time to have a general chat as well as to explain what you are doing.
- Check for any red or sore areas while the person is undressed.
- Let your local nurse or GP know if you are concerned about anything.
- Make sure the person is thoroughly dried, especially in the skin folds. It is easy for skin to become chafed and sore.
- Focus on the person and not the task.

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Anxiety surrounding personal hygiene

Personal care, including washing and bathing, is a common source of anxiety for people with dementia and their carers. This is quite understandable – we have all been used to performing these activities in private since we were small children. Common reasons for anxiety include:

- The person may be worried by deep water in the bath. They may be reassured if the bath water is shallow or a bath seat is used.
- A mirror may startle him/her.
- The rush of water from an overhead shower may be frightening and disorienting. A hand-held shower may work better.
- Incontinence is an emotive issue – both for the person with dementia and the person caring for them. If the person has an ‘accident’ they may feel ashamed and may refuse to admit it has happened or to wash afterwards. They will need reassurance. A matter of fact approach often works well, so does humour. The approach you adopt will depend on the situation and nature of your relationship with the person.
- The person may be embarrassed by your presence. One strategy might be to keep one part of their body covered while you help them wash the other part.
- On the other hand, they may become anxious if they are left on their own and want you with them all the time.
- Have a familiar person help, if needed.

“Be sensitive to the person’s preferences and try to work out which approaches are most likely to be effective. ”

Be sensitive to the person’s preferences and try to work out which approaches are most likely to be effective. You may need to adapt your approach from time to time.

Bathing alternatives to reduce stress and anxiety:

- Wash a different section of the body each day of the week.

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- Shampoo hair on another day.
- Sponge bath only between showers or baths.

After bath care essentials:

- Check for rashes / sores / skin irritations especially if incontinence is a problem.
- Dry skin and skin folds very well
- Apply skin lotions to moisturize skin.

Washing hair

Most people like having their hair washed regularly and feel better when it is done. You may find a hand-held shower works best. Women, in particular, may prefer to have their hair washed by a hairdresser if the routine is familiar. It is possible to find hairdressers who will come to the house.

However, some people really dislike having their hair washed. In that case you will need to balance the advantages of clean hair against the disadvantages of creating tension between you.

Using the toilet

Try to make sure that the person wipes themselves properly from front to back after using the toilet or help them to do so if this is acceptable. Moist toilet tissues, obtainable from any chemist, are useful if the person has had an accident.

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A flexible approach

Where a person is reluctant to wash you may find that different approaches work at different times, depending on the person's mood and on the severity of their dementia. Whatever happens, try to remain calm and find a way to cope that does not involve argument or confrontation.

- The person may respond to gentle reminders about using the toilet or washing.
- Coax and use cues and prompts
- A matter of fact approach may work best.
- Sharing a joke about any muddles may help you both feel better.
- It is better to remove dirty clothes and substitute clean ones at bedtime or after a bath than to get involved in arguments about the need to change clothing.
- The person may agree to have a wash because they are going out or because you are expecting visitors.
- Take care of skin folds and genitalia
- It may be a question of timing or the way the request is phrased. A person may adamantly refuse to wash when you suggest it but may decide to wash themselves later in the day. This does not mean that they are being difficult. It may relate to the damage that has been caused to the nerve pathways in the brain.
- If a person appears very confused it may help them if you break the process down into small stages. If the nerve pathways are damaged, the person will not be able to process a lot of information at once. So, for example, handing the person the soap and flannel to wash themselves and then the towel to dry themselves may work.
- If bathing or showering causes distress, a strip wash may be sufficient. It may be better to help the person to wash all in one go or in stages.
- Sew soap into wash cloth
- All purpose gel for bath and shampoo
- Use soaps that rinse off freely.

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Notes:

Contact us:

3rd Floor,
State House,
3 Rose Street,
Cape Town

P.O. Box 16421
Vlaeberg
8018

Tel: (021) 421 0077/78
Email: info@dementiasa.org
Or support@dementiasa.org



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