



Caring for the Carer

Staying healthy

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

It is helpful if you can prevent health problems from occurring or at least catch them at an early stage. Do not hesitate to contact the GP or other professionals for advice. Here are some suggestions that you may find useful.

Check-ups

General health

You can ask your GP to give the person with dementia a general health check-up if you are worried about their health or if it would simply put your mind at rest. If there is any area of particular concern, such as high blood pressure or diabetes, make sure the person has regular checkups at the doctor's surgery.

Eyes, ears and teeth

It is also a good idea to get all other aspects of the person's physical health, such as their eyes, ears and teeth, checked as soon as possible while:

- they are still able to give information about themselves
- they are more able to adjust to any changes that may be needed, such as glasses, a hearing aid or dentures.

Regular check-ups will also be easier if the professional concerned has been able to establish a relationship with the person at an early stage.

Medication

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

- Check with the GP to make sure that the person is not taking any unnecessary drugs. People sometimes continue with repeat prescriptions longer than is needed.
- Check too that they are taking the lowest possible effective dose of any drug that they need.
- Some drugs or combination of drugs may increase the person's confusion or have other unwanted side-effects. Always let the GP know immediately if this occurs.

You will need to find ways to ensure the person 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 boxes with compartments labelled with the day and time or 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 take an extra dose by mistake. Lock medicines away as an extra precaution.

Keeping a careful eye

As dementia progresses people often become less steady on their feet. They may be inclined to fall more easily or have other accidents. However, they may not always tell you about these so you need to check regularly for any cuts or bruises that may need attention.

Check for rashes or sore places when you are helping the person to wash or dress. You need to be particularly vigilant for 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 public health nurse as soon as possible. Untreated pressure sores can become infected and may make the person ill.

Keeping warm

The person with dementia may not notice or be able to tell you if they become cold. However, becoming cold for any length of time is a risk to health and can be dangerous, particularly among older people. A drop in body temperature, known as hypothermia, results in a gradual physical and mental slowing down. This can lead to loss of consciousness and even death if left unremedied.

- Try to make sure that the rooms where the person sleeps and sits during the day are kept warm. Draught proofing and roof insulation, if there is an attic, will help.
- Layers of clothing are the best way of staying warm, particularly if the clothing is made of natural fibres such as wool.
- Make sure the person with dementia wears some form of head covering as well as gloves and warm socks if they go out in cold weather or inside if it is impossible to heat the home sufficiently to keep them warm.

Remember they may feel the cold far more than you. Their circulation may be poor if they are less active.

Diet

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

- The person may forget to eat if they are on their own. You may need to try and arrange for someone to be with them at mealtimes.
- If the person refuses to eat the sort of food you feel they need, the GP may suggest alternatives or prescribe vitamins or other supplements.

Eating too much or too many high-calorie foods can lead to considerable weight gain which may in turn result in health problems.

- If the person eats too much, try tactfully to limit the amount of food available or offer low-calorie food as snacks.

Make sure that the person drinks enough liquid each day. Otherwise they may become dehydrated, which is a risk to health and can lead to greater confusion.

Constipation

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

- plenty of high-fibre foods such as cereals, wholemeal bread, fruit and vegetables
- plenty of liquid
- regular exercise.

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

Sleep

The person with dementia may become confused about night and day and may get up at night and wander round the house or try to prepare a meal, for example. It is important for everyone to get a good night's rest wherever possible. It may help if you can:

- avoid too many day-time naps
- limit fluid intake in the evening and avoid stimulating drinks like tea and coffee
- ensure enough exercise and stimulation during the day
- find soothing ways to encourage the person to sleep such as a warm milky drink.

Smoking

If the person with dementia smokes, you may want to encourage them to give up for the sake of their general health. Smoking causes lung and other forms of cancer and also increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, chronic bronchitis and many other illnesses. They are likely to feel far fitter if they give up. You may find that they forget about smoking if cigarettes and ashtrays are removed from sight.

If they do wish to continue, try to make sure that they only do so when someone else is around because of the risk of fire.

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:

- alcohol can cause people with dementia to become even more confused, so it is important to limit the amount of drink
- alcohol does not mix well with certain medicines. If in doubt, ask the GP for advice.

Keep drink out of sight or locked away if there is any worry that the person may drink at inappropriate times or forget that they have had a drink and simply go on drinking.

Hearing

Poor hearing can add to the person's confusion and feelings of isolation.

- If you think they have a hearing problem, ask the GP to refer them for a hearing test.
- If they use a hearing aid, make sure it is switched on and working properly. Some people with dementia find a hearing aid too difficult to manage.
- You may need to attract the person's attention before speaking to them. Speak slowly and clearly. Make sure there is no distracting background noise such as the television or loud voices.

Sight

Problems with sight can also increase confusion and make it harder for the person to recognise people or objects.

- The person should see an optometrist on a regular basis to test their sight. There are special techniques for assessing sight, even in people with late dementia.
- The optometrist should also check for cataracts and glaucoma, both of which can lead to blindness if left untreated, and certain other medical conditions.
- Remind the person to wear their glasses, if necessary, and check that the lenses are clean.

Teeth

Regular visits to the dentist are 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 be distressing and may lead to difficulties with eating and drinking and additional 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.

Feet

Healthy feet are essential if the person with dementia is to remain mobile and active.

- Check that their shoes fit well. Slippers should not be worn for more than a few hours at a time as they do not offer enough support.
- Keep feet clean and dry and toenails cut short.
- If the feet or any part of a 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 ingrown toenails, for example, consult a qualified chiropodist.

Exercise

Regular exercise is vital for the health of someone 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 them to feel better and sleep better.
- It can help to reduce anxiety, depression and stress.

Mobility

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

- If they become unsteady on their feet, seek advice from an occupational therapist on aids and equipment such as grab rails to enable them to move more safely.

- They will probably spend quite a lot of time sitting, so a firm comfortable chair is important. It should be one that is easy for them to sit down in and get up from.

- If you have to support them to move, seek advice from an occupational therapist or physiotherapist so that you do not damage them or yourself.

Depression and anxiety

A certain amount of depression or anxiety is common, particularly in the early stages of dementia when people are more likely to be aware that something is wrong.

- If the person is able to talk about what is troubling them, listen and show you understand their feelings rather than brushing them aside or jollyng them along.
- Offer affection and support.
- If you feel that the person is particularly depressed or anxious, ask the GP for advice. It is often easier to deal with such problems at an early stage.

Well-being

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

- affection and reassurance that they still matter
- freedom from outside stress
- appropriate activities and stimulation to enable them to remain alert and motivated for as long as possible.