



Living alone

If someone close to you has dementia and is living on their own you are bound to feel anxious about them. Wherever possible, talk things over with the person concerned, with members of the family and with experienced professionals. There are a number of ways to enable a person to live at home safely and for longer. Here are some suggestions.

Familiar surroundings and routines are reassuring if a person is confused. Most people are happier if they can continue to live in their own home for as long as possible. Indeed, some people with dementia deteriorate quite quickly when they move away from their own home to live with a family member or into residential care.

However, a person with dementia who is living on their own will probably need a good deal of support, particularly as the dementia progresses. It is a good idea to get in touch with Dementia SA, which can offer support at an early stage. Do not wait until a crisis develops.

Handling risks

Although many hazards can be minimized with forethought and planning, a certain amount of risk may be unavoidable if the person with dementia is to retain their independence and enjoy a good quality of life.

There is no such thing as a risk free environment. It will help if you can discuss how the question of risk can be handled in the most caring way with other family members. It is also good to discuss this with any professionals who are involved. You need to agree on what you consider to be an acceptable level of risk after all reasonable precautions have been taken. Of course, other arrangements for care will have to be made if the person's quality of life becomes too poor or the risks to themselves or to other people become too great.

Family responsibility

It is very common for one member of the family to be given and to accept responsibility for the person with dementia. Often others fail to recognize the stress involved. It is better for everyone in the family to contribute to decision-making so that they can participate in the care from the start. Try to have a family meeting at an early stage and work out what each family member can realistically offer now and in the future. This may help to avoid later feelings of resentment or guilt.

- Regular visits, an agreement to take the person shopping once a week or to do the washing, for example, are ways of providing support.



- Relatives who do not live locally may be able to contribute towards the cost of home care, or they may agree to stay locally (in the house or nearby) while the main carer takes a holiday.
- If there are likely to be family tensions or communication difficulties, ask an objective outsider such as a social worker or community psychiatric nurse to a family meeting.
- Keeping in touch through regular visits, letters, emails or phone calls so that everyone remains aware of the situation as it changes and are able to participate in the decisions that have to be made.

Other commitments

You may feel torn between offering support to the person with dementia and other commitments.

- If you have a partner or children try to make sure that they fully understand the needs of the person with dementia.
- If you can involve them in some aspect of caring they may be more inclined to give you the backing you need.
- If you are working, explain the situation to your employer and colleagues you trust.

Saving your energy

Dementia is a condition which gets worse and can go on for many years. It will not be good for anyone if you wear yourself out. Look carefully at what you are doing and decide how best to direct your energy. Some efforts such as trying to keep the person's house immaculate may not be necessary.

Some activities, such as doing the shopping, might be carried out equally well by someone else. Accept help from others. Even if you are prepared to be the main carer, you must make it clear to the rest of the family and to any professionals involved that you need support. You are entitled to a life of your own.

Attitudes to help

A person in the moderate stages of dementia may be reluctant to admit that they really need help. However, it is easier to introduce effective support for a person in the earlier stages. Try to persuade the person that they need help in order to remain independent. Then, if they object at a later stage, you can remind them of your joint decision. This is often effective and may help you both to remain calm.



Sometimes you may have to resort to strategies to avoid upsetting the person. For example you might arrange to take them out while someone else cleans the house thoroughly. Or you could involve a friend to spend some time with them while you clear out the fridge. It is quite common for a person with dementia to object to paying for their care or to forget to do so. You may be able to make payments on their behalf (see information sheet on financial and legal arrangements).

Anyone who provides help for someone with dementia must be prepared for criticism. They must also expect to be ignored or to have the person claim that no one gives them any help. Although this may be hurtful try not to take it personally. The fact that the person's memory and understanding are impaired means that they genuinely do not remember all that you are doing for them.

Tips

Telling other people

Once there is a proper diagnosis by the doctor explain the person's illness to people they know, such as their friends and neighbours, local shopkeepers and post office staff, the postman and, if necessary, the local police. These people may see the person you care about regularly and may take time to chat, offer help in various ways or keep a watchful eye on the person.

Explain briefly about the symptoms of dementia such as problems with concentration and memory loss. Explain that it helps to keep sentences short and clear and to use a reassuring tone, gestures and touch to aid communication. Emphasise that a person with dementia should never be patronized or treated as if they are stupid or a child.

Health

Any illness may increase the person's confusion. If it is possible go with them to the GP or to a hospital appointment, talk to the doctor yourself and check on any medication. Hearing aids, glasses and dentures need to be regularly checked, as should the person's feet, particularly if they are having problems walking. You may be able to arrange for an optician, dentist or chiropodist to call at the person's home if they are housebound.



Medication

Drugs can add to confusion. Make sure that the person is only taking medication which the doctor feels is absolutely necessary. Ensuring that a person with dementia takes the right amount of medication at the right time can be a problem. Some of the professionals who are involved in community care are not allowed to administer medication. Discuss this with the doctor, the pharmacist and the community nurse. You can purchase pill boxes, which help with this problem. These boxes have clearly labeled separate compartments for each day of the week and the different times of the day.

Some pharmacists will agree to put a week's medication into these boxes for you or you can do it yourself. Once the medication has been set out like this a phone call from you to remind the person may be sufficient in the early stages.

This is one of the areas of care where you will have to make adaptations as the condition changes. Dispose of any old unused medicines as they may be taken by mistake. Keep the current supplies of medication in a place where the person cannot see or reach them. Check with the pharmacist before giving an over-the-counter remedy such as aspirin or paracetamol.

Memory Aids

In the early stages a noticeboard prominently displayed with useful telephone numbers may be helpful. Details of expected callers and when they are calling, e.g. doctor, information and emergency contact numbers, will all help.

It will also help the carer if details such as the location and numbers are kept, particularly if there is a crisis.

Clock

A clearly visible battery run clock may help the person to keep track of the time, at least at first. The memory aids and the clock should help to reduce anxiety, at least at first. Make sure that the clock has a face that is easy to read and that it is situated in the right place. Check that the person is comfortable with the type of clock; avoid the digital type if it is not readily understood.

Similarly, if someone visits each day, they could cross off days on a calendar with the person. Labels or notes on cupboards, drawers and doors can be useful. It depends on whether the person finds them helpful or not.



Food

It is important to ensure that the person eats a balanced diet. As the dementia progresses shopping and cooking for them may not be enough. Someone may need to be with them to ensure that they eat at least one proper meal a day.

You may also need to check regularly that the food has not been left to decay. This should be done with tact. This is very important because a person with dementia may eat decayed food because they no longer recognize or smell that it is inedible. Meals on Wheels are not very suitable for people with dementia as they may forget to eat the meals.

Housebound safety

Make sure that the home is well lit and that there are no obvious hazards such as trailing or loose flexes, loose stair rails or unsteady furniture. Items in daily use in the kitchen should be within easy reach. Remove dangerous substances such as cleaning fluids, bleach and paint stripper or lock them away. If the electric wiring is very old it may be dangerous. Ask advice from a qualified electrician. Make sure that it is not possible for the person to take an electric heater into the bathroom. Remove locks from the bathroom and toilet if the person is likely to lock themselves in (see advice sheet on safety in the home).

Helpful Equipment

The person with dementia will probably not be able to learn how to use new equipment so installing a shower, when they have been used to a bath, or a microwave instead of a conventional oven may not be much help. However, handrails on the stairs and by the bath and toilet may be helpful. An occupational therapist (OT) can advise on rails and other ways of making the home safe. You can contact an OT through your GP, Clinic or Community Health Centre.

Warmth

It is important that the person's home is adequately heated. If they live mostly in one room it may be sufficient to ensure that this room is warm. Draught proofing and insulation may help to keep down heating costs. Wearing several layers of clothing can also help to keep them warm.

If they forget to put the heating on, you may need to consider some form of heating that switches on automatically. Fires can be a hazard so make sure that any fire or heater has a fixed guard. Avoid electric blankets if the person is likely to be incontinent.

Oil filled fin heaters or wall panel heaters are safer options than bar heaters



Gas and candles

If you are worried about the person's use of gas appliances – for example, if they are inclined to turn the gas on without lighting it – contact a home service adviser through your local gas company. Arrange to be there when they visit. They will advise on helpful adaptations and a range of safety measures.

In the event of power failures make sure that torches and not candles are used.

Water

You may worry that the person will forget to turn off the tap and flood the home. There are a number of devices such as taps which only make a certain amount of water available. Contact your local water company for advice. Although such devices are not cheap they may be cheaper than the cost of clearing up after a flood and will give you some peace of mind. It is also a good idea to turn down the temperature on the geyser to prevent the person with dementia from burning themselves.

Walking about

If the person is inclined to leave the house and walk about the streets, it may be advisable for them to wear some form of identification with your name and telephone number on it or the telephone number of a helpful neighbour. There are different designs for identification purposes, a bracelet or a pendant is available. You can also sew a label with this information into a handbag or a coat if appropriate.

Security

This can be a problem. The person may go out, leaving doors and windows wide open. They may welcome strangers into their home or they may lock themselves into the house and not answer the door. It is helpful if a reliable neighbour can keep an eye on the home and hold a spare set of keys. You can ask neighbours to let you know if they see strangers going into the person's home. Make sure that there are no chains or bolts that would prevent you getting in if there is an emergency.

Electricity

Smoke detectors over the stove are a very useful precaution. Good neighbours can help by being alert to electrical risks they may observe (such as exposed wiring and defective alarms).