

## 4 | Practical care day to day



Activities such as dressing, washing, using the toilet, eating and sleeping are a normal part of everyday life. However, even these routine tasks become increasingly difficult for people with dementia to perform on their own. This chapter provides some useful guidelines as to how people with dementia and carers might be able to help the people themselves to live as well and as independently as possible. The amount of help needed will obviously change over time.

## GENERAL QUESTIONS

*My father, who has Alzheimer's disease, is coming to live with me and my family. I fear he is going to be difficult to look after, so can you give me any tips?*

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It can be difficult to look after someone with Alzheimer's disease. However, you may find the following tips from other carers helpful:

- Try to establish a routine.
- Allow your father some independence.
- Help him maintain his dignity.
- Avoid confrontation whenever possible.
- Keep tasks simple.
- Maintain a sense of humour.
- Make sure your home is as safe as possible.
- Encourage your father to take exercise.
- Help make the best of your father's existing abilities.
- Remember that problems are probably due to the disease, not the person.
- At all times be flexible, because dementia is progressive, and you are both going to have to adapt with the changes that occur as time goes on.
- Learn as much as possible about his condition.
- Keep in touch with other carers.
- Recognise when the strain on you and your family is becoming too much.

*My husband has recently been diagnosed as having Alzheimer's disease. I am in my early 70s and still very fit. How long am I likely to be able to carry on looking after him in our home?*

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The answer to this question will depend on the rate at which your husband's illness progresses, on your own on-going state of health and on how much support you can get from family, friends and outside agencies. (See Chapter 9 for information on getting help.) Even with support, though, you are unlikely to be able to manage your husband at home in the later stages of his illness. However, it is not really possible to predict in advance how long it will be before this point is reached.

*Do you think it is possible that my wife with dementia is able to do less and less for herself because I am doing more and more for her?*

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Your wife is able to do less and less because dementia is a progressive condition. This means that her abilities will inevitably decline with time. You will need to do more and more for her as time goes on, but if you do too much for her too soon her abilities will decline more rapidly.

It is important to recognise the things that your wife can still do for herself and to encourage her to do these even though she may take a long time to do them. If you disregard what she is still capable of, and do everything for her, she will quickly lose the functions that she still has. Try to be patient and to take over from her only the things that she really can no longer manage. The progressive nature of the disease means that the situation will continue to change. You will be able to respond best to your wife's changing needs if you work with her, and are flexible in your attitudes.

*My mother has Alzheimer's disease. She also has painful-looking leg ulcers. She doesn't complain about them. Can people with dementia feel pain?*

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**I**t can be quite difficult to know how much pain someone with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia is experiencing. This is particularly true later in the illness, when not only are people unable to tell you that they are in pain but also even their normal responses to pain can be difficult to interpret.

Recognising that someone is in pain is less of a problem earlier in the illness, particularly if you are looking after someone you have known for a long time. You will usually be able to tell that something is wrong from the way that the person behaves. For example, he or she may become restless, sleep badly or not want to eat. Also look out for changes in their posture or gait or changes in their facial expressions. However, even though you may recognise that the person is in pain, you will not be able to rely on him or her to tell you where the pain is or how severe it may be. You (or the doctor) will have to work this out from what you know about the person.

In general, it is best to assume that a procedure that would normally be painful – such as having a leg ulcer dressed – would be equally painful for someone who has dementia, even though they cannot tell you about it.

## DRESSING

*We both want my husband to carry on dressing himself for as long as possible. However, he is finding it increasingly difficult. Can you suggest how I might be able to make dressing easier for him?*

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**Y**ou are right to continue to encourage your husband to dress. One way of helping your husband is to make sure that he always has plenty of time. Provided that the room is warm, it does

not matter if dressing takes a while. It might also help him to manage better if you lay his clothes out for him in the order he needs to put them on. Later in the illness, you will probably need to hand his clothes to him one at a time, and give instructions as to how to put them on.

Some clothes are easier to put on than others. Neck openings should be a good size. Raglan or drop sleeves are easier than tight sleeves. Slip-on shoes are useful. Clothes with elasticated openings or Velcro fastenings are simpler than clothes fastened with buttons. Some people find that T-shirts and track suits are an excellent substitute for ordinary shirts, trousers and jackets. However, if your husband has been used to wearing more traditional clothing in the past, he may not like the change. If at all possible, do try to involve him in choosing what he is going to wear each day.

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*I have early dementia. I'm having real difficulty deciding what to wear and seem to end up with the same clothes each day. The wardrobe is too full of choice for me.*

It is very common to have too many clothes in your wardrobe, which you have had for years but cannot bear to part with. Try to go through what you have and pick the clothes you really like. Be brave, throw or give away the rest. You might need some help with this, so ask a relative or close friend to do it with you.

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*I'm having real problems persuading my mother not to wear the same clothes for days on end. Her clothes get really grubby and she often looks unkempt. She gets so upset if I say anything. What can I do?*

Your mother probably no longer recognises the need to change her clothes nor knows which ones are clean and which need washing. One possible way to help might be to encourage her to have a bath and then take this opportunity to remove the clothes that need washing and to lay out a clean set for her. If you do this,

she will probably put the clothes on and you will not be hurting her feelings.

## PERSONAL HYGIENE

*Is it common for people with Alzheimer's disease to hate having their faces washed? My wife does not mind having a bath, but protests at having her face washed. Does it matter?*

This is not especially common. What has probably happened is that your wife no longer understands the need to wash her face. She may also find it undignified to have someone else wash her face for her. Of course, it does not really matter if her face is not washed. It certainly is not worth having a battle about this.

You could try buying a new soft and pretty flannel. Then try to make face washing fun by getting your wife to wash your face with it before she either lets you wash her face or does it herself.

*My husband is always washing his hands. He seems to forget he's just done it. The main problem is that he keeps leaving the taps running. How can I stop him from flooding the bathroom?*

Various tap adaptations are available. Some will cause water to flow only when someone's hands are under them. Others have an automatic cut-off after a certain quantity of water has been run, or after a set time. Your water company should be able to provide a catalogue. These adaptations may seem expensive, but if you have metered water will probably save you money as well as much mopping up. If you can't afford the adaptation, it may be worth trying your local Social Services or the caring fund of your local Alzheimer's Society branch.

An alternative approach, if you haven't already tried it, is to find other activities for your husband that may distract him from the repetitive washing activity.