

Staying healthy with dementia



When someone is diagnosed with dementia – whether this is soon after the first symptoms develop or after many months or even years – it is natural to be worried about the future and how their physical and mental health will be affected.

The changes associated with dementia often take place slowly, over months or years, although they can be more sudden – but it is impossible to predict how quickly it will progress.

Currently, there is no cure for dementia, and medication to ease the symptoms and slow its progression is not suitable for everyone with the diagnosis. However, by taking some simple steps, the person with dementia can stay physically and mentally healthy and maintain a good quality of life for as long as possible.

Eating and drinking well

A healthy, balanced diet will help to keep the person with dementia in good physical health. It will protect their heart and circulatory system and help them maintain a healthy weight, which can reduce the risk of other health conditions – such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke – that may have a negative effect on their condition. It will also help them stay fit and independent for as long as possible.

For most people, a healthy diet includes:

- fruit and vegetables – aim for at least five portions a day. All forms of fruit and vegetables count: fresh, tinned or frozen fruit and vegetables; dried fruit; soups, stews and pasta sauces containing vegetables; and fruit juice and smoothies
- starchy food like bread, rice, pasta and potatoes – these should make up around a third of the person's daily diet. Ideally, choose high fibre foods like brown bread, wholemeal pasta, brown rice and potatoes with their skins on



- meat/meat substitutes and other sources of protein, eg lean meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and pulses, and vegetarian/vegan alternatives. Try to limit processed meat like sausages, bacon and ham
- dairy or dairy alternatives, eg milk, cheese, yoghurt, fromage frais, soya milk
- small amounts of fats, oils and spreads – try to choose unsaturated versions such as vegetable, sunflower or olive oil

Foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt – such as crisps, cakes, sweets, biscuits, butter and ice cream – sugary soft drinks and sugar in tea or coffee should be consumed less often and in smaller amounts.

The NHS Eatwell Guide is a helpful guide to a healthy diet: please see Sources of support on p15.

While it is important to support the person to eat healthily, dementia may affect their eating habits. For example, some people overeat, crave sweet foods, or lose their appetite completely, especially in the later stages. Please see Sources of support on p13 for information on eating and drinking for people with dementia.

It is also important for the person to drink enough – for most people, this is 1.5 litres of fluid a day (about six to eight glasses) but be guided by your knowledge of the person with dementia. This fluid intake can include water, tea, coffee, soup, squash, fruit juice and milk, but not alcohol.

Some people with dementia struggle to drink enough fluids – please see Sources of support on p14 for our information on good hydration.

If the person drinks alcohol this should be kept to a minimum, as it can worsen symptoms like confusion and increase the risk of falls, as well as having a negative effect on their overall health. There are many good alternatives to alcoholic drinks, including low or zero alcohol wine, beer and spirits, and mocktails. For advice on drinking safely, please see Sources of support on p15.

Exercise and dementia

As far as possible, a person with dementia should be supported to be physically active. Exercise not only has physical health benefits but is also proven to lift mood and often provides vital social contact.

Some people living with dementia, particularly those with young onset dementia (where symptoms develop before the age of 65), may be very active already, and maintaining exercise levels is good for their overall physical and brain health, for example by boosting blood flow to the brain. Activities that the person may be able to carry on with or try for the first time include:



- walking
- running
- swimming
- cycling
- gym
- golf
- racquet sports
- yoga
- Pilates
- Tai Chi
- group exercise classes like Zumba, keep fit or aqua aerobics
- dancing

Teaming up with a friend or ‘exercise buddy’ or joining a club can be beneficial for people who want to take part in exercise such as running, walking or cycling. This is especially helpful for people who still have the energy and stamina to run, walk or cycle long distances but may become disorientated if they try to follow a route on their own.

In some areas, there are specific fitness activities for people with dementia, such as dementia-inclusive exercise classes or swimming sessions – contact the local leisure centre to see what is on offer.

As dementia progresses, people often become more frail and less fit. They may experience mobility problems and be prone to falls. This will affect how much exercise they can do and at what level, but it is still important to support them to be as active as possible, taking into account their individual capabilities. This will benefit their overall health, including their mental health, and help them maintain their mobility for as long as possible.

The person with dementia may be able to do chair-based exercises or yoga, stretches, or simply take a gentle walk around the garden or move from room to room, with support if necessary. Housework and gardening can also provide light exercise for people who find getting out and about more difficult.

Bear in mind that too much physical activity can be tiring for a person with dementia, and exhaustion may make their symptoms appear worse, so it is important to find a balance that works for them so they can pace themselves accordingly.

Healthcare

It is important to ensure the person with dementia has their physical health monitored to receive any appropriate health advice or treatment. They should:

- attend an annual dementia review with their GP – this may not be offered automatically so you may need to request it
- attend regular health checks as recommended by the GP, eg blood pressure and blood tests, breast screening and bowel cancer screening
- take medication as prescribed
- have regular reviews of medication
- report any sudden changes in physical health, memory, concentration or mental health to the GP
- keep up to date with dental, hearing and eyesight checks
- make sure they receive flu and Covid jabs if they are eligible
- stop smoking – the GP can provide information on local services that support smokers to quit, or see Sources of support on p15

The person's carer should also look after their own physical health so they are able to continue in their caring role. It is a good idea to register as a carer with the GP so they can receive support such as annual health checks, flu and Covid vaccinations. Please see Sources of support on p14 for more information.

Sleep

Poor sleep can affect concentration and cognitive function, so it is important to support the person with dementia to sleep well. Sleep disturbances are common in dementia, but the following tips may help:

- Aim for the person to go to bed and get up at the same time each day
- Avoid caffeine from late afternoon – you could offer

decaffeinated tea or coffee, a soft drink, or herbal or fruit tea

- Include some physical activity and fresh air every day, but try to schedule it earlier in the day
- Keep evenings calm and quiet, especially if the person experiences sundowning – a state of disorientation and anxiety that often happens around dusk. Please see Sources of support on p14 for information
- Ensure that any children in the home understand that this is a quiet and relaxing time of day – you could encourage younger children to play quietly in another room, or older children to use headphones if they are listening to music or playing video games
- Keep phones, tablets and TVs out of the bedroom – this will reduce distractions and also prevent the ‘blue light’ emitted by devices from disturbing sleep
- Ensure the bedroom is quiet and dark – using a blackout blind or heavy lined curtains can help to block out light
- If the person drinks alcohol, ensure they avoid it entirely after 6pm as it can affect sleep patterns
- Keep daytime naps to 30 to 60 minutes, and avoid napping after 3pm
- If the person with dementia is unable to sleep when they go to bed, experiment with slightly later bedtimes

For more information on sleep and dementia, please see Sources of support on p14.



Mental wellbeing

Mood changes are very common in dementia but with mental and emotional support, the person can live as well as possible with the diagnosis.

- Social contact and companionship can give people a sense of belonging; provide mental stimulation; and present opportunities to share enjoyable experiences. This could include spending time with family, friends and pets; taking part in groups and activities outside the home (eg walking, singing or music groups); visiting day centres or memory cafés; going on day trips; or visits from a volunteer or befriender
- Sensory stimulation can promote relaxation and wellbeing, for example listening to music; looking at photos or paintings; aromatherapy, such as a hand massage with a fragranced lotion or a scented bath; or holding something comforting like a soft blanket, cuddly toy, fidget toy or twiddle muff – please see Sources of support on p15

- Support the person to maintain their independence – at work, around the home, with their family, out and about (if this is safe), and with everyday living tasks
- Do not put off difficult conversations about issues such as finances, medical treatment, care decisions or living arrangements. Addressing these together can provide peace of mind about the future and enable the person to communicate their wishes before it becomes difficult to do so. Please see Sources of support on p13-14 for our information about future planning, including advance care planning and lasting power of attorney
- Focus on the person's strengths rather than on the difficulties caused by their dementia
- Work together to create a 'life story': a record of the person's life and what is important to them. It can prompt reminiscence; boost self-esteem; and encourage the person to think about who they are, what they have done, and what they can still contribute. Please see Sources of support on p14 for information
- Live for the day – focus on achievable daily goals (eg "Today, we will do the shopping"), not ambitious long-term ones

It is often thought that people with dementia do not experience anxiety or depression, but this is not the case – although they may not be able to communicate how they are feeling. If you have any concerns about the person's mental health, support them to speak to their GP as there may be treatment options including medication or talking therapy, depending on their symptoms, type and stage of dementia. Please see Sources of support on p13 for more information.



Everyday living

Making some simple changes to everyday life can help a person with dementia to feel secure, comfortable and fulfilled, and maintain their physical and mental health and independence.

- Encourage the person to participate in activities and interests that suit their strengths and abilities – these may be activities that they have always enjoyed (with adaptations, if necessary) or new ones
- Try to keep to a consistent daily/weekly routine – this can help the person feel more settled and avoid unexpected events that may cause distress
- Adapt social situations so they are easier to manage – for example, scale down gatherings to a few people at a time; reduce distractions when communicating, such as by turning off the TV or radio; ask people to speak one at a time; provide a quiet ‘breakaway’ space at larger gatherings like parties

- Encourage activities or hobbies that provide purpose, meaning and interest – such as spending time with their children or grandchildren; volunteering; creative activities like art, writing, music or photography; taking care of a pet; visiting a place of worship; dance; gardening etc
- Adapt the person's home to make it as safe and comfortable as possible – it is particularly important to keep their home clutter-free so they can move around safely. Please see Sources of support on p14 for more information
- Join support groups for people affected by dementia to meet new people in a similar situation and share advice and friendship. Your GP, social worker or local council may have information about groups in your area

Seeking help and support

If you or the person with dementia are finding it hard to come to terms with their diagnosis, it is a good idea to talk to someone about how you are feeling. This could be a family member, friend, colleague, GP or social worker.

Some people prefer to talk to someone independent such as a counsellor. You can ask your GP for a referral or refer yourself for NHS talking therapy – although bear in mind that waiting lists can be long. See Sources of support on p15 for information on finding a talking therapies service. You can also speak to one of our dementia specialist Admiral Nurses – see Sources of support on p13.

If you or the person with dementia are experiencing ongoing low mood or feelings of anxiety, please speak to your GP – looking after your mental health is essential when facing the many complex changes and challenges that come with dementia.

Sources of support

If you are caring for someone with dementia or living with the condition yourself, you can register for our free online sessions, ‘Dementia: what next?’ Hosted by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses, they cover topics like types of dementia, symptoms, financial and legal issues and planning for the future. Sign up at

➤ dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next

To speak to an Admiral Nurse on our free Helpline, call **0800 888 6678** (Monday-Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm, every day except 25th December) or email ➤ helpline@dementiauk.org

If you prefer, you can book a phone or video call with an Admiral Nurse at a time to suit you: please visit ➤ dementiauk.org/book

Dementia UK resources

Advance care planning

➤ dementiauk.org/advance-care-planning

Anxiety, depression and dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety-and-depression

Doll therapy

➤ dementiauk.org/doll-therapy

Eating and drinking for a person with dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/eating-and-drinking

Emotional impact of a dementia diagnosis

➤ dementiauk.org/emotional-impact-of-a-diagnosis

Falls

➤ dementiauk.org/dementia-and-falls

Frailty and dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/frailty-and-dementia

Good hydration for a person with dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/hydration

Lasting power of attorney

➤ dementiauk.org/lasting-power-of-attorney

Life story work

➤ dementiauk.org/life-story

Making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/safe-comfortable-home

Registering as a carer with your GP

➤ dementiauk.org/the-importance-of-registering-as-a-carer-with-your-gp

Sleep and dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/good-habits-for-bedtime

Sundowning

➤ dementiauk.org/sundowning

Other resources

Breast screening (mammogram)

➤ nhs.uk/conditions/breast-screening-mammogram

Bowel cancer screening

➤ nhs.uk/conditions/bowel-cancer-screening

Covid vaccine

➤ nhs.uk/vaccinations/covid-19-vaccine

Flu vaccine

➤ nhs.uk/vaccinations/flu-vaccine

NHS alcohol advice

➤ nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-advice

NHS Eatwell guide

➤ nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/the-eatwell-guide

NHS quit smoking advice

➤ nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking

NHS talking therapies

➤ nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/nhs-talking-therapies

Sitting exercises

➤ nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/strength-and-flexibility-exercises/sitting-exercises

Twiddle muff fact sheet

➤ ouh.nhs.uk/patient-guide/documents/twiddle-muffs.pdf

**To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse
about any aspect of dementia:**

Contact our Helpline:
0800 888 6678 or helpline@dementiauk.org

Book a virtual appointment:
dementiauk.org/book

**Our charity relies entirely on donations to fund our
life-changing work. If you would like to donate to help us
support more families:**

- Call **0300 365 5500**
- Visit **dementiauk.org/donate**
- Scan the QR code

Thank you.



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