

How to risk assess the home for a person with dementia

We all have items in our home that could cause unintentional harm, especially to vulnerable people. This includes people with dementia, who may be at increased risk of accident or injury for reasons including:

- memory problems causing them to forget what items are and how to use them safely
- difficulty reading, following and remembering instructions, for example for operating household appliances
- loss of recognition, so they may not recognise objects, or may mistake them for something else
- difficulty with coordination, balance and mobility, increasing the risk of spills, breakages and falls

If you care for someone who is living with dementia, it is important to consider risks within the home. Here are some tips to help keep the person safe.





Reducing the risk of poisoning

- Store any toxic products which could be consumed or swallowed – such as medicines, cleaning products, chemicals, other hazardous substances and objects like batteries – in locked cabinets or cupboards when not in use
- Many household cleaning items, such as dishwasher and laundry tablets, are small and brightly coloured and could be mistaken for edible items like sweets, so keep them out of sight
- Do not leave e-cigarettes/vapes and refills in sight, as the chemicals in them are highly toxic if consumed. If the person uses these themselves, supervise them during use and ensure they are put in a secure place after use
- Products should always be stored in their original containers with lids securely fastened. Do not reuse old chocolate, sweet, cake or biscuit tins/tubs to store products like medicines as this could increase the risk of the person consuming them
- If you believe the person has ingested any potentially toxic product or has taken too much prescription or non-prescription medication, phone 999 for assistance. If paramedics attend, show them the packaging to help them assess the likelihood of harm



Reducing the risk of burns, scalds and electric shocks

- Use the back hot plates of cookers and turn pan handles inward
- Consider the person's safety when drinking hot drinks – for example, avoid leaving them on a coffee table if the person is prone to falls, and ensure they have cooled slightly before drinking
- Think about fitting stove guards and oven locks
- Adjust the thermostat on the hot water system to ensure it does not run too hot – high temperatures, especially over 44°C, can create a scalding risk
- Contact with hot pipes or radiators can cause injury, for instance if the person with dementia falls against them, so consider turning down the heat using the control knobs or fitting insulation or covers
- Hairdryers and straighteners can become very hot, so use them on a low setting, supervise the person while they are using them if necessary, and put them away once they have cooled
- Place fire guards around all fires
- Lock away lighters and matches when not in use
- Consider replacing candles with battery operated ones to reduce the risk of them being left burning or knocked over
- Use safety locks on appliances that could cause burns
- To prevent electric shocks, keep electrical cords, including chargers and extension leads, out of reach or safely hidden away when not in use
- Use plug covers to prevent the person inserting their fingers or other objects into electrical sockets
- Consider installing additional gas cut-off valves/lockable cooker valves. These can often be fitted for free; contact your gas supplier for advice



Reducing the risk of falls

- Keep the environment clutter-free – avoid leaving objects on the floor, and keep electrical cables tucked against the wall, ideally secured to the skirting board with cable clips
- Use window guards and locks to prevent the person with dementia climbing out or falling from windows
- Use a non-slip mat in the bath or shower and install a grab rail
- Ensure steps and stairs are well lit and clutter-free, with a sturdy handrail, and the carpet is well fitted
- Stair lifts may cause a hazard as they can reduce the walking space on the stairs and may be used incorrectly. The person with dementia may need supervision when using it. If you have concerns, seek advice from the manufacturer or an occupational therapist



Reducing the risk of strangulation

- Keep cords from blinds and curtains out of reach and tied away in case the person with dementia becomes caught in them
- Clothes with cords or drawstrings may pose a risk, so consider taking them out or replacing them with clothes that fasten with zips, poppers or buttons
- Clothes with a belt or tie, such as dressing gowns, may pose a risk so put them away in a wardrobe when they are not being worn



Reducing the risk of cuts

- Keep knives, scissors and other sharp utensils in a drawer with a safety latch
- Consider using a lockable drawer or cabinet for added security
- Remove knife blocks from counters
- Store glasses and other breakable items in high cabinets and consider changing to less fragile items for everyday use, eg plastic beakers
- Store appliances with sharp blades, like blenders or food processors, out of reach or in a locked cupboard

In some cases, a person with dementia may attempt to use a sharp object such as a knife or glass bottle to harm themselves or others, or to protect themselves from a perceived danger – especially if they are feeling highly confused, threatened and unsafe.

If you feel vulnerable, find a safe place in the home (eg the bathroom with the door locked) or leave the property until the risk has passed. If an incident does occur, please call 999 for help.

For more information, please see our page on keeping safe when you care for someone with dementia: dementiauk.org/keeping-safe





Reducing risk from dogs

- Owning a dog can bring many benefits to family life. However, it is important to be aware of the risk of bites, even if you do not expect it from your own dog. Most bites happen at home, by a familiar dog.
- To reduce the risk of the person with dementia being bitten – which could happen if, for example, they do not recognise the signs of the dog becoming stressed by excessive attention – you may need to introduce a more supervised daily routine.

Pay close attention to your dog's body language so you can give them space if they are getting stressed:

- A worried dog may have their head low and ears back with their tail tucked
- An angry dog may have a tense body with their weight forward and their ears and tail up



Reducing risks in the garden

- Remove any poisonous plants from your garden
- Never leave the person with dementia unattended near water features, ponds or pools. Consider using barriers or safety nets
- Store garden tools, machinery and ladders in a locked shed or garage
- Garden chemicals like weed killer and slug pellets may be toxic, so consider reducing or avoiding their use
- Try to do garden tasks together so you can supervise the person, particularly when they are using electrical or bladed equipment or ladders



Supervision and support

- Always offer the person support around the home and if necessary, supervise potentially hazardous items and activities
- Keep a first aid kit handy and ensure you know some basic first aid procedures – organisations like St John Ambulance offer first aid training
- Have emergency contact numbers easily accessible, such as the person's GP and family/friends you could call on for help





Dementia UK resources

Falls and dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/dementia-and-falls

Living aids and assistive technology for a person with dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/living-aids-and-assistive-technology

Keeping safe when you care for a person with dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/keeping-safe

Making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/making-the-home-safe-and-comfortable

Medication management for a person with dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/medication

Other resources

Electric shock advice (St John Ambulance)

➤ sja.org.uk/get-advice/first-aid-advice/minor-illnesses-and-injuries/low-voltage-electrocution/

Fire safety in the home

➤ assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62876fa8d3bf7f1f4947d309/Fire_Safety_in_the_Home_v4_-_Web_accessible.pdf

NHS poisoning advice

➤ nhs.uk/conditions/poisoning

St John Ambulance first aid courses

➤ sja.org.uk/courses

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA)

➤ rospa.com

UK Cleaning Products Industry Association guidance on storing cleaning products

➤ ukcpi.org/take-action-today

Understanding a dog's body language

➤ rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/behaviour/understanding