Making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia
Introduction

Dementia can have a significant impact on a person’s daily life, including how well they function within their home. Memory issues or problems recognising and interpreting the objects around them can cause the person frustration or create safety issues. The person’s difficulties can be made worse by other health conditions, which might affect their sight and mobility.

To help the person with dementia maintain their independence and to support them to have a good quality of life, it’s important to make their home as easy to manage as possible. This leaflet has tips that our dementia specialist Admiral Nurses use in their practice to help people with dementia to be safe and comfortable at home.

If possible, try to involve the person with dementia in decisions about any changes you are making. If this is not possible, always make sure decisions are taken in the person’s best interests.

Changes to a home do not have to be expensive. With some simple adjustments, a home can become safer and more comfortable, helping the person with dementia to be independent and remain in their home for longer.
Taking a tour around a safe and comfortable home for a person with dementia:

Outside the home, the front door and hallway

Keeping the outside of the person with dementia’s home the same over time can be really helpful to them. Maintaining the colour of the front door and looking after any trees or plants, so that they do not change substantially, can help the person recognise that they are coming home. A large door number can be helpful.

There are some other simple things you can do to make going out or coming home straightforward. These include:

- keeping the hallway uncluttered so it is easy to get in and out of the front door
- having a clear, easy to read clock, with the day and date
- keeping keys in the same place; preferably somewhere not visible through the door or a window. A drawer in a hallway table is ideal
The kitchen

Kitchens can be potentially hazardous as a person’s dementia progresses, but there are lots of steps you can take to make this room safer and easier to navigate.

Making sure that everything the person may need is in easy reach can help, as can clear instructions and labels for commonly used kitchen equipment. Here are some ideas you could consider:

- keeping cups, tea bags, spoons, or other commonly used things on the kitchen counter
- replacing solid cupboard doors with clear doors, so that the contents are easy to see; or sticking a photograph of the contents, or a simple sign, on the cupboard door. An alternative to this is to simply take the doors off; this can work if there is no danger of things falling out of the cupboard
- clearly labelling hot and cold taps, either by writing the words on labels beside each tap, or, if possible, replacing with ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ marked taps
- using plain plates in one, light colour (ideally white) to make the food stand out. Using different coloured place mats from the plate, to make it easy to see
- keeping on top of use-by dates and having regular clear-outs
- looking into products that can help to maintain independence and safety, such as electric kettles that switch off automatically; modified jar openers, chopping boards, graters etc. (please see Sources of support)
- keeping toxic cleaning products in a locked cupboard
- speaking to your gas supplier about gas valve limiters. These are usually free to install, and can be very helpful if you are worried about the gas being left on
- hanging a calendar on the wall for dates of appointments, yours and other relative’s visits, other notable dates etc.
Making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia

The living room

Living rooms should be comfortable and cosy. Here are some things to consider for keeping a person with dementia as comfortable as possible.

- Make sure chairs are comfortable and offer good support. Assistive furniture, which helps people stand up and sit down, can be very useful – although sometimes expensive
- Simple remote controls with large, clearly labelled buttons can be bought, that work with any television
- Voice assistants (such as Google, Alexa or Siri) can be useful, if a person starts to use them early in their dementia
- The living room can be a good place to put up photos of family, to reassure the person with dementia, and to act as a memory aid
- The living room is one of the most common areas where falls
happen. There are many things you can do, to reduce the risk of falls. These include:

• making sure there is nothing unnecessary on the floor, especially wires and leads
• removing rugs or making sure their edges are secured or stuck down
• choosing furniture that is helpful – i.e. chairs that are the right height, and easy to get in and out of; and removing any chairs, stools or tables with thin legs, that can be tripped over
• considering a personal alarm, that the person can press in case they do fall over (these can be kept somewhere in the room but are more useful if worn by the person). Your local authority can advise you on services offering this in your area

It is a good idea to take away any electric fires or heaters, that could be accidentally left on, or tripped over. If the person tends to get cold, leave a blanket in easy reach on their chair.
The bedroom

It’s important for everyone to have a safe and relaxing place to sleep well at night, and a straightforward space to get ready in the morning. You could try:

- reducing clutter in the bedroom, so there is lots of room around the bed
- laying out clothes for the person, for the morning. Some people with dementia can find choosing items from drawers or wardrobes difficult
- installing a movement or bed sensor that will let you know if the person gets out of bed, so that you can help them if you need to
- fitting a plastic mattress cover on the bed, if the person is incontinent of urine; or buy body-worn continence products to protect their skin and the bed overnight (see Sources of support for the Dementia UK leaflet on continence)
- bedding that is appropriate for the weather and keeps the person comfortable during the night. If the person is too hot or cold, they are more likely to wake up
- putting an easy to read clock somewhere prominent, set to the right time and date – if this is helpful to them
- having a touch-operated bedside light, or night light on the landing, so the person can easily see if they get up during the night

The bathroom

Colour and contrast are key to helping someone navigate this room. You could try:

- leaving the light on in the bathroom at night so it’s easier to find
- having a toilet lid and seat in a different colour to the toilet itself, so that it is easy for the person to see; and leaving the toilet seat up, so the person
doesn’t have to lift it

- removing toilet and bath mats, so that they person doesn’t slip on them. Some people with dementia have difficulties with their vision, where patterns or contrasts on the floor can look like a hole, or other obstacle

- having a free-standing holder for toilet paper, that is easy to see

- using toilet paper that is a different colour to the holder, walls and floor

- choosing bath towels in a different colour to the wall, so they stand out

- installing grab rails at useful points around the bathroom, ideally in a different colour to the wall

- using flood and scald prevention plugs. These stop baths overflowing by releasing excess water down the plughole, in case a bath is left unattended. These are available from most shops that sell assistive products (See Sources of support)
Walls and floors

Walls and floors can be difficult to change, but if you are considering redecorating, or if the person living with dementia is moving somewhere new, there are a few things that you could consider:

- where possible, have matt flooring and walls, as shiny surfaces can appear wet or slippery to a person with dementia
- choose one block colour rather than patterns, as decoration can cause confusion
- if possible, try and keep a consistent colour or style running along the floor, and another one for the walls, as changes in pattern or colour can look like an obstacle or a step
- keep walls a different colour from the floors

Light and noise

A well-lit home can be helpful for a person with dementia, to allow them find their way around and reduce the risk of falls. To increase the amount of light in your home, you could try:

- creating more natural light by pushing back curtains and taking down net curtains or blinds
- having light-coloured curtains, if possible, to help reflect daylight
- installing lightbulbs with a high wattage
- placing the person’s favourite chair by a window so they get more natural daylight, and can look outside to see what is going on
- using portable low-level lights or a plug-in night light in hallways to help them see at night

At night time, you might like to use heavy curtains in the bedroom to help the person sleep. Leaving an unobtrusive nightlight in the corridor, or leaving the bathroom light on, can help the person get to the toilet in the night.

Overstimulation can cause
agitation and distress in people affected by dementia, as it can be difficult to concentrate on more than one thing at a time. Try to reduce unnecessary background noise from TV and radio, unless you are using them. If the person lives in a busy environment with other people, try to organise a quiet space for them to retreat to easily, if helpful.

Fire safety

It is important that the home is as safe as possible from fire. To prevent unnecessary risks to your home or the home of the person living with dementia, you could try:

- contacting your local fire service, which might provide you with a free home safety check to identify risks within the home and, if you’re eligible, fit a smoke alarm for free
- fitting smoke alarms, carbon monoxide detectors and heat detectors throughout the home
- checking the batteries on smoke alarms regularly
- buying fire retardant bedding and throws for furniture
- getting gas and electric appliances checked annually
- speaking to your gas supplier about fitting an isolation valve on the cooker, to prevent gas from running too long, if the oven is turned on and unattended
- buying a cooker guard for electric ovens, which cuts the power before the temperature gets too high, or when a pre-set time has elapsed
- sticking clear, typed-up instructions on devices that use heat. For example, you could remind the person that foil and metal do not go in the microwave, or to turn the iron off at the plug

Preventing falls at home

People living with dementia are at an increased risk of falling, and may also find it harder to recover from injury afterwards.
If a person with dementia has had a fall, it’s important to work out the cause so you can take steps to prevent it from happening in the future.

If you’re worried about the person’s mobility, you could purchase a personal alarm for them so that they can seek help if they have a fall.

To prevent falls around the house, you might like to try:

- removing rugs, as they can be loose and easy to trip over
- making sure the person has footwear or slippers that fit properly and aren’t loose
- looking out for any other trip hazards, including objects and wires on the floor
- keeping essential objects in one set place, within easy reach of the person with dementia, such as glasses or television remotes – so they do not need to get up to look for them
- reminding the person not to rush
or carry too much at once

- installing bannisters or rails, to support the person getting up and down the stairs, or manoeuvring around the bathroom

- ensuring that the person's general physical health is in good condition and that they aren’t dehydrated, constipated and have good nutrition

**Labels and signs**

Signs can help guide a person around their house, if the person has started forgetting where rooms are, or struggles to remember what is in cupboards. Sticking labels on doors or some items can be useful to help a person retain independence, and allow them to continue carrying out their daily routines. However, it is important not to introduce too many new systems at once as it could create confusion.

Start small and with the things that are the most useful to the person.
You could put pictures of a toilet, bath and sink on the bathroom door. You could stick pictures of tea cups and tea bags to a cupboard.

Signs should be clear, easy to understand, and at eye level. You can find images and signs online and print them off, or buy signs from a shop that sells assistive living aids (please see Sources of support at the end of this leaflet).

**Memory aids**

If the person with dementia is having trouble remembering where they keep things, you could try:

- keeping important items in one, consistent place. This can include keys, money, notebooks, medication, a phone book of important numbers etc.
- hanging a whiteboard or blackboard somewhere conspicuous, to write reminders for the person, such as appointments or events; when you are next coming, or anything that reassures them
- displaying a large calendar clock showing the day, date and the time
Sources of support

There are a number of useful websites that sell aids and assistive technology for people with dementia, to help make day-to-day activities easier to manage. We recommend that you think carefully about the person’s needs as some aids may work for some people and not others.

- AT Dementia
  [www.atdementia.org.uk](http://www.atdementia.org.uk)

- Adaptawear
  [www.adaptawear.com](http://www.adaptawear.com)

- Complete Care Shop
  [www.completecareshop.co.uk](http://www.completecareshop.co.uk)

- Live Better With Dementia
  [dementia.livebetterwith.com](http://dementia.livebetterwith.com)

- Dementia UK leaflet on continence
  [www.dementiauk.org](http://www.dementiauk.org)

An occupational therapist can provide practical support and advice to help maintain the person’s independence and day-to-
day activities. They will be able to advise on the best adaptations and specialist devices. Speak to your GP or local social services department to arrange this.

For a private occupational therapy assessment, contact the British Association of Occupational Therapists and College of Occupational Therapists. Call 020 7357 6480 or visit www.cotss-ip.org.uk

The British Association of Occupational Therapists is the professional body for all occupational therapy staff in the UK and The College of Occupational Therapists operates as a registered charity. www.rcot.co.uk

Disabled Living Foundation is a charity that provides information about finding solutions to help with independent living, such as mobility aids. www.dlf.org.uk

The Royal College of Physicians offers a resource on the importance of avoiding falls and fragility fractures. www.rcplondon.ac.uk/guidelines-policy/strong-bones-after-50-fracture-liaison-services-explained

Our Admiral Nurses can help

If you have any questions or concerns please contact our Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline to speak to a specialist dementia nurse.

Call 0800 888 6678 or email helpline@dementiauk.org

Opening hours:
Monday – Friday, 9am – 9pm, Saturday – Sunday, 9am – 5pm