Dealing with restlessness
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Many people with dementia experience restlessness, including fidgeting, pacing and trying to leave their home. This can be upsetting for the person with dementia – especially if they are prevented from moving around – and for family members, who may in particular worry about the person’s safety.

Restlessness can occur for many reasons. The person may have an unmet need that they cannot communicate, such as hunger, pain or distress. Or they may be disorientated and confused about where they are.

These are some of the possible causes of restlessness, and ideas that may help.

Hunger or thirst

- People with dementia may forget to eat or drink, or not recognise the signs of hunger or thirst
- Offer smaller portions or snacks if they don’t want to eat full meals
- Eat a snack or meal together as encouragement
- Make sure there is always a drink close at hand, and encourage them to take sips
- If they don’t like drinking water, provide squash or juice instead
- In the later stages of dementia, when chewing and swallowing may be affected, use ice chips or artificial saliva to stop their mouth becoming dry and uncomfortable

There is more advice in our information on eating and drinking: see Sources of support on p10 for details.

Being too hot or cold

- Set the heating to a comfortable temperature – 18–21°C is ideal
- Leave a blanket within reach that the person can use if they are cold
- In hot weather, offer drinks regularly
- Help them choose appropriate clothing for the weather – people with dementia sometimes get confused about what they should wear
- Ensure they have the right bedding to keep comfortable at night
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- Keep up with regular health checks with their GP or other healthcare professional
- Support them with a mouthcare routine to prevent dental pain. For more information on mouthcare, see Sources of support on p10
- Make sure their chair and bed are comfortable. You could use pillows to position them, or look at adaptive furniture that makes it easier to sit and stand
- Encourage movement – even if just walking around the room – to prevent discomfort or pressure sores
- Make an appointment with the GP if you believe the person may

Open windows in hot weather. If the person is likely to try to get out through a window, you could use window locks that stop them being opened fully, or shut the curtains so they can’t see that the window is open

In sunny weather encourage the person to sit in the shade

Pain

- Be aware of what may be causing their pain. Many people with dementia have other conditions alongside, such as arthritis, joint pain, heart conditions, stomach or bowel problems, or dental problems
- Ensure they take any medication as prescribed
be in pain to discuss treatments and/or pain medication

Our information on pain and dementia has more suggestions. See Sources of support on p10 for details.

**Bladder and bowel problems**

- Encourage the person to eat a balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables and regular drinks, and to stay mobile if possible, to prevent constipation
- Look for signs of problems like a urinary tract infection (UTI) or constipation — for example, needing the toilet more often, or pain while passing urine or opening their bowels. Make a GP appointment if needed
- Ask regularly if they need the toilet and support them if necessary — they might need help finding the bathroom, for example, especially in an unfamiliar environment
- At home, leave the toilet door open and the light on at night so they can find it easily
- Look for non-verbal signs of needing the toilet, such as holding their crotch or stomach
- If they experience incontinence, make sure they are wearing the right protection to keep comfortable, and help them change as necessary

For more advice, read our information on continence: see Sources of support on p10 for details.

**Boredom**

- Support the person with dementia having a change of scene. You could go out for a gentle walk, sit in the garden, or just move to a different room
- Find meaningful activities to engage in. This could be anything from voluntary work in the early stages of dementia, to helping in the garden or kitchen, to doing jigsaws or simple crafts
- Encourage visits from friends and family
- Look for new ways to socialise outside the home. Support groups for people with dementia and their carers, day centres,
memory cafés and singing groups can all offer stimulation and social connection

**Anxiety and distress**

- If the person is in unfamiliar surroundings and this is making them anxious, try to return to a familiar environment. If this isn’t possible, providing a safe, quiet space – for example, a spare room in the house they are visiting – may help

- Ask how they are feeling and listen carefully to their answer. Even if they can’t fully express their emotions, being asked may validate their feelings

- Try to establish if something in their environment is causing anxiety, like a strong cooking smell or someone doing DIY, and remove the source of distress if possible

- Sitting close, holding their hand or stroking their arm can provide reassurance. A gentle hand massage can also be soothing

- Play music, read to the person, watch a film together or look at photos

- Having something comforting to hold, like a cuddly toy or a soft blanket, can reduce anxiety
If the person often seems anxious or depressed, it’s worth making an appointment with their GP. In some cases, medication may be appropriate to ease their distress.

For more information on anxiety and depression, see Sources of support on p10.

Coping with pacing

Sometimes, the person with dementia may get up and start pacing. This can be frustrating for both of you, but there is always a reason for it, even if they cannot identify or communicate it.

Spending a lot of time inside, sitting down, can be frustrating for anyone. So if the person wants to walk about, this is fine as long as they are not in any danger and it is not causing distress. You may need to walk together to ensure they are safe.

Make their home environment as safe as possible to prevent falls, for example by ensuring trailing wires are tucked out of the way, removing rugs or using grippers to stop them slipping, and fitting sturdy handrails on steps. Our information on making the home safe and comfortable has more ideas: see Sources of support on p10.

Try to establish whether there is an unmet need that you could help with. For instance, they may have stood up to go to the toilet but have forgotten what they were doing or need help to get there. Or the person may be uncomfortable from sitting down and need to stretch their legs.

If the person is in hospital or a care home, tell the staff looking after them that they like to move around so they can be supported to do so safely.

Coping with wanting to leave the house

A particular worry for many families is when the person with dementia wants to leave their home. This may happen if they are unaware of the risks of going out alone, or if they are confused about where they are in time – for example, if they are retired but still think they need to go to work, or believe that their adult children still need to be taken to school.

Sometimes, people want to leave
the house if they have become disorientated and struggle to recognise that where they are is ‘home’. This confusion often becomes worse at dusk – which is known as ‘sundowning’. You can read more in our sundowning information: see Sources of support on p10 for details.

Wanting to leave the house can also happen if the person is thinking about somewhere they lived in the past.

The following methods may help the person with dementia feel less inclined to want to leave the house.

- Put coats and bags away in cupboards, rather than keeping them near the front door. For some people, seeing these items makes them think they were about to go out.
- Hang a curtain rail above the front door and pull the curtain when appropriate – for example in the evenings, or at times when they often try to leave their home. Hiding the door may stop them wanting to open it.
- Involve the person in household tasks that they used to like to do, like gardening or helping prepare meals. This can help them feel
included and purposeful and reduce their desire to leave the home

- Ask the person about the place they want to go to and listen carefully to what they say. Speaking about previous homes and the memories they made there can help them to feel reassured and less restless.

- If possible, give the person opportunities to leave the house safely, with you or another family member or friend for support.

- You can lock doors and windows, but do carefully consider the person’s needs, as trying to open locked doors and windows may cause some people distress.

Assistive technology such as tracking devices, alarms and monitors can be very useful to help you know where the person is around the house. This means that you do not need to follow them around, which may cause them more anxiety.

Social Services can provide you with information about what assistive technology is available, and any funding you might be eligible for. A Needs Assessment may be
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arranged to establish what support they need: see Sources of support on p10 for details.

What to do if the person leaves the house

It’s important to have a contingency plan in case the person with dementia succeeds in leaving their home alone. For example:

- Talk to your neighbours. Explain the situation and make sure you have their contact details and they have yours
- Make sure the person always has their name and your contact details on them. Sew an identity card into their coat, bag, wallet or purse, or encourage them to wear identity jewellery, such as a bracelet or necklace
- Complete a Herbert Protocol form. This is a national scheme to help the police find missing, vulnerable people. As well as personal details, you can include information such as health and communication difficulties, and significant places that they may try to visit. You should complete this form in advance and hand it to the police if the person goes missing. See Sources of support on p10 for details
Sources of support

You may find the following Dementia UK information helpful:

**Eating and drinking**
dementiauk.org/eating-and-drinking

**Pain in dementia**
dementiauk.org/get-support/maintaining-health-in-dementia/pain-in-dementia/

**Continence**
dementiauk.org/continence

**Managing anxiety and depression in a person living with dementia**
dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety-and-depression

**Making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia**
dementiauk.org/making-home-safe-and-comfortable

**Sundowning**
dementiauk.org/sundowning

You may also find these resources useful:

**Young onset dementia identity cards**
youngdementianetwork.org/resources/young-onset-id/

**Getting a Needs Assessment**

**The Herbert Protocol**
met.police.uk/herbertprotocol
Our Admiral Nurses can help

If you have any questions about restlessness or any other aspect of dementia, you can contact our free Helpline to speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse.

Call 0800 888 6678 or email helpline@dementiauk.org

Opening hours:
Monday-Friday, 9am-9pm
Saturday-Sunday, 9am-5pm
Every day except 25th December

You can also pre-book a phone or video appointment with an Admiral Nurse at a time to suit you. Visit dementiauk.org/get-support/closer-to-home/
The information in this booklet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses.

We are always looking to improve our resources, to provide the most relevant support for families living with dementia. If you have feedback about any of our leaflets, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

We receive no government funding and rely on voluntary donations, including gifts in Wills.

For more information on how to support Dementia UK, please visit dementiauk.org/donate or call 0300 365 5500.

Publication date: February 2022
Review date: February 2024
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If you’re caring for someone with dementia or if you have any other concerns or questions, call or email our Admiral Nurses for specialist support and advice.

Call 0800 888 6678 or email helpline@dementiauk.org

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Saturday and Sunday, 9am-5pm

dementiauk.org • info@dementiauk.org

Dementia UK, 7th Floor, One Aldgate, London EC3N 1RE
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