Music has many benefits for people with dementia. Even in the later stages, when people may lose the ability to communicate in other ways, they can often sing, hum or tap along with the music they hear.

Research has shown that music can:

- improve attention, cognition (thinking), memory, speech and communication
- reduce heart rate and blood pressure
- trigger the release of hormones called endorphins, which have pain-killing properties and can boost mood
- reduce agitation, anxiety and depression in some people.

Music can help people with dementia express feelings and connect with memories. It can also help them communicate and engage with others, and form and maintain relationships.

Music can be used in a range of ways – individually, in a group, or in a care setting like a day centre or care home – such as:

- listening and/or singing along to favourite pieces of music
- listening to music played through headphones
- listening to the radio (particularly stations playing music from the person’s past – see Sources of support on p7)
- watching a musical (live or on TV) or a film with a musical score
- singing in a group or choir
- playing instruments
- listening to a live performance
- dancing

It is important that these activities are tailored to the person’s individual needs and preferences. They can be used as part of a care plan – for example, if someone is calmed by particular pieces of music, their care plan may suggest playing these if they are feeling anxious or agitated.

A person’s musical preferences can also be included in their ‘life story’ – a record of their past and present life that helps give family, friends, carers and hospital staff a
better understanding of them as an individual. Please see Sources of support on p7 for information on life stories.

### How music can help a person with dementia

Listening to or participating in making music can:

- help a person with dementia express feelings and ideas
- encourage physical exercise, dance or movement
- provide interaction, reduce loneliness and promote participation in groups
- reduce distress – it may be particularly helpful while giving personal care
- help the person reminisce and talk about their life

### Choosing music with or for a person with dementia

Ask the person with dementia and their family and friends what music they enjoy listening to.

If you are unable to find out about their likes and dislikes, experiment with popular music from their cultural background and era. You
could use their age as a guide to the type of music they may like.

However, do not assume that the person will only enjoy music from their early life – music can cross generations, so they may like songs that remind them of their children’s younger years, or music that they hear on the radio now.

Watch how the person reacts to the music you choose. If they express a dislike for the music or seem uncomfortable or distressed, try something different. They may simply not like that type or piece of music; they may find it too loud or overstimulating; or it might remind them of unhappy times in their life.

If the person responds positively, use the music to engage with them. If they sing, tap their fingers or feet or hum, try joining in.

You could also:

- Keep a selection of CDs near a CD player so the person can choose music and put it on. Keep a simple set of instructions next to the CD player or radio in case they need a reminder of how to do it
- Music and radio can also often be played via a smart TV
- Look for dementia-inclusive performances of musicals, concerts, films or opera taking place in local venues

**Making music**

The ability to make music – whether by singing or playing an instrument – may continue even when other abilities are lost. If the person with dementia has a musical background, encouraging them to continue with this could boost their self-esteem and help them focus on what they can do, rather than what they cannot.

If the person plays an instrument, keep it to hand with sheet music nearby if they can read it – for example, keep the piano open so they can see the keys or leave a guitar in their living room.
Encourage them to play if they show an interest.

You could also look into music groups that they can participate in, such as community or church choirs; orchestras, bands or ensembles; and singing groups developed especially for people with dementia.

If they do not play an instrument or are no longer able to, you could provide simple percussion instruments such as a tambourine or maracas to help them engage with the music and bring a sense of joy.

**Music and reminiscence**

Music can trigger memories and emotions in a person with dementia. This provides an opportunity to talk and reminisce – for example, you could ask the person why they like a piece of music, what it makes them think and feel, and whether it evokes special memories.

Using pictures or photos alongside music can provide another way to reminisce and share memories.

**Music and exercise**

Dancing or moving to music can improve physical and mental health, so if the person with dementia is able to, encourage them to get up and move. If they are physically fit, you could look for dance-based exercise groups for them to join, such as aerobics or Zumba, or find home workouts online or on DVD that are set to music.

If they like to run or walk, playing music through earphones can be a good way to keep them motivated. If they are vulnerable when going out alone, you could go with them or arrange an exercise buddy for their walks or runs.

If they are less mobile, simply sitting and moving to music – for example by waving their arms, clapping or tapping their feet – can help them feel more engaged.
Music therapy involves activities such as singing, listening to music, playing musical instruments and improvising. It can encourage reminiscence, reduce anxiety and depression, encourage people to interact and reduce agitation. It is sometimes used to improve quality of life for people with dementia who cannot take medication.

Music therapy may be available on the NHS – often through a memory clinic – or arranged privately. For more information on organisations that offer music therapy, please see Sources of support on p7.
Sources of support

To speak to a specialist dementia nurse about music and dementia or any other aspect of dementia, please call our Helpline on 0800 888 6678 (Monday to Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm) or email helpline@dementiauk.org

To book a phone or video call appointment with an Admiral Nurse, please visit dementiauk.org/book-a-clinic-appointment

Dementia UK resources
Tips for better communication dementiauk.org/better-communication
Anxiety, depression and dementia dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety-and-depression
Creating a life story dementiauk.org/creating-a-life-story
Difficulty with sounds dementiauk.org/dementia-and-difficulty-with-sounds

Other resources
British Association of Music Therapists bamt.org
BBC Music Memories – playlists from the decades musicmemories.bbc.co.uk

Memory Radio musicmemories.bbcrewind.co.uk/radioRecords
Live Music Now livemusicnow.org.uk/wellbeing_older_people
Music for Dementia Radio (m4d Radio) m4dradio.com
Music Mirrors musicmirrors.co.uk
Playlist for Life playlistforlife.org.uk
Singing for the Brain alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/your-support-services/singing-for-the-brain
If you have questions or concerns about any aspect of dementia, please contact our Admiral Nurses.

Helpline: 0800 888 6678 or helpline@dementiauk.org

Virtual clinics: dementiauk.org/book-a-clinic-appointment

We want to ensure no one has to face dementia alone – and we can only do this because of our generous supporters. If you would like to help, please consider making a kind gift.

To donate: call 0300 365 5500, visit dementiauk.org/donate-to-support or scan the QR code.

Thank you.