



DementiaUK
Helping families face dementia

Staying healthy with dementia



Dementia is a progressive condition, with changes typically happening over the course of several years. 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.

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

Eating and drinking well

A healthy, balanced diet will help to keep the person with dementia in good physical health.

It will help protect their heart and circulatory system, 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 maintain a healthy weight.

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 your 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.

Please see Sources of support on p10 for information on eating and drinking for people with dementia.

It is also important to drink 1.5 litres of fluid a day (about six to eight glasses) – this can include

water, tea, coffee, squash, fruit juice and milk, but not alcohol.

Some people with dementia struggle to drink enough fluids – please see Sources of support on p10 for our information on good hydration for a person with dementia.

If the person drinks alcohol this should be kept to a minimum – 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 p10.

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 your mood and often provides vital social contact.

People with young onset dementia in particular may be very active already, and maintaining exercise levels is good for their overall physical health and brain health, for example by boosting blood flow to the brain.

Activities that the person may like to try include:

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

In some areas, there are specific fitness activities for people with dementia, such as dementia-friendly exercise classes or

swimming sessions – contact the local leisure centre to see what is on offer.

Teaming up with a friend or ‘exercise buddy’ or joining a club can be beneficial for people who wish to take part in individual 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 confused or forgetful if they try to follow a route on their own.

Many people with dementia have mobility problems, especially as their condition progresses. However, you can still support them to be as active as they are able, for example with chair-based exercises or yoga, stretches, or simply helping them to take a gentle walk around the garden or move from room to room.

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 make



their dementia symptoms worse, so it's important to find a balance that works so they can pace themselves accordingly.

Healthcare

Make sure the person with dementia and their carers have their physical health monitored to receive any appropriate health advice or treatment. They should:

- 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 the flu jab and Covid-19 booster
- stop smoking – your GP can provide information on local services that support smokers to quit, or see Sources of support on p11

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 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 every day, but try to schedule it earlier in the day
- Keep phones, tablets and TVs out of the bedroom – this will create a calm space and also prevent the ‘blue light’ emitted by devices from disturbing sleep
- Ensure the bedroom is cool, 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 p10.

Everyday living

Making some simple changes to everyday life can help a person with dementia feel secure, comfortable and fulfilled.

- Encourage the person to participate in activities and interests that match their strengths and abilities – these may be activities that they have always enjoyed (with adaptations, if necessary) or new ones
- Try to stick 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 with family or friends to a few people at a time; reduce the number of 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 if larger groups of people are gathering, eg at a wedding

- Encourage activities or hobbies that provide purpose, meaning and interest such as 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 (see Sources of support on p10 for more information)
- Find support through local or online groups and clubs. Peer support groups can help you meet new people in a similar situation to share advice and

friendship. Your GP, social worker or local council may have information about groups in your area, or you can contact our Dementia Helpline – see p10

Improving 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.

- Focus on the person's strengths rather than on the difficulties caused by their dementia
- Work together to create a 'Life Story', where you compile a record of the person's life and what is important to them – this could be a written account, a scrapbook, a memory box or videos, for example. This can help trigger memories, boost self-esteem, and help the person think about who they are, what they have done, and what they can still contribute (see Sources of support on p10 for our Life Story information)
- Social contact and companionship are very important to give a sense of belonging, provide mental stimulation and share enjoyable experiences. This could take the form of 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 being supported by a volunteer or befriender
- Sensory stimulation can help with relaxation and wellbeing, for example listening to music; looking at soothing images such as photos or paintings; aromatherapy, such as a hand massage with a fragranced lotion or a scented bath; holding something comforting like a soft blanket, cuddly toy, fidget toy or twiddle muff – visit ouh.nhs.uk/patient-guide/documents/twiddle-muffs.pdf for instructions for making twiddle muffs
- Support the person to maintain their independence – at work, around the home, out and about

(if this is safe), and with everyday living tasks

- Don't put off difficult conversations about issues such as finances, medical treatment, care decisions or living arrangements. Addressing these as a family 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 p10 for our information about future planning, including Advance Care Planning and lasting power of attorney
- Live for the day – focus on achievable daily goals (eg “Today, I will do the shopping”), not ambitious long-term ones

Seeking help and support

There is a lot to take in when someone is diagnosed with dementia, and it can be difficult to adapt to the changes to the way you live.

If you or the person with dementia are finding it hard to come to terms with a diagnosis of dementia it is a

good idea to talk to someone about how you are feeling. This could be a family member, a friend or a colleague, a 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 p11 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 p10.

If you or the person with dementia are experiencing ongoing low mood or feelings of anxiety, please speak to your GP. It is often thought that people with dementia cannot experience anxiety or depression, but this is not the case, so it is important to seek support. Please see Sources of support on p10 for information on anxiety and depression in dementia.

Sources of support

To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse about staying healthy or anything else related to 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/closer-to-home

Dementia UK resources

Eating and drinking for a person with dementia
dementiauk.org/eating-and-drinking

Good hydration for a person with dementia
dementiauk.org/hydration

Physical activity for a person with dementia
dementiauk.org/meaningful-activities-physical-exercise

Dementia and sleep
dementiauk.org/good-habits-for-bedtime

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

Creating a Life Story
dementiauk.org/creating-a-life-story

Advance Care Planning
dementiauk.org/advance-care-planning

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

Anxiety, depression and dementia
dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety-and-depression

The emotional impact of a dementia diagnosis
dementiauk.org/emotional-impact-of-the-diagnosis



Other resources

NHS Eatwell guide

[nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/the-eatwell-guide](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/the-eatwell-guide)

Sitting exercises

[nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/strength-and-flexibility-exercises/sitting-exercises](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/strength-and-flexibility-exercises/sitting-exercises)

NHS alcohol advice

[nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-advice](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-advice)

NHS quit smoking advice

[nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking)

**Breast screening
(mammogram)**

[nhs.uk/conditions/breast-screening-mammogram](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/breast-screening-mammogram)

Bowel cancer screening

[nhs.uk/conditions/bowel-cancer-screening](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/bowel-cancer-screening)

**Find an NHS psychological
therapies service**

[nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-a-psychological-therapies-service](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-a-psychological-therapies-service)

The information in this leaflet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses. We hope you find it useful. If you have feedback, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

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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.



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



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