

# Living alone with dementia



In the UK, an estimated 120,000 people with dementia live alone. This could be through choice or because their circumstances have changed – for example, if their partner has died, if they have separated, or if adult children have moved out.

A person in the early stages of dementia may be able to live alone and completely independently for some time, but as their symptoms progress, it may become harder for them to manage on their own.

If this situation arises, it is important that they are involved in discussing and planning the next steps. Encourage them to talk honestly about how their symptoms are progressing and anything they are finding challenging. Let them know that it is okay to ask for help if they need it. With adaptations or support, they may be able to maintain their independence within their own home for longer.

Remember, though, that everyone lives their life differently, and the person with dementia may not make the same decisions as you would, especially if they have lived alone for some time. This does not necessarily mean that they are not coping, so as long as they are safe, it is their right to choose how to live their life – even if you do not agree with everything they do.

### Useful technology

Technology like a mobile phone, tablet or smart device such as Alexa can be a great help for people with dementia who live alone. It can be used:

- to set reminders, eg for taking medication, social events, appointments and birthdays
- to navigate when out and about
- to look up useful information like bus timetables
- for online shopping



They also enable family and friends to keep in touch and support the person remotely, for example with email or messaging apps, video calls or a shared calendar.

Assistive technology and safety devices can also be useful. For example:

- devices that can be pre-set with voice reminders, such as prompting the person to lock the door when it detects the door being opened
- panic buttons
- fall alarms
- wearable GPS tracker devices or tracking apps
- video doorbells
- cameras in the home

These can be reassuring for family members – but always respect the person's right to privacy and consult them before any form of monitoring device is installed.

Please see Sources of support on p18 for our information on living aids and assistive technology.

### **Routines and organisation**

Being well organised with a simple daily and weekly routine can help the person manage at home alone. This could include:

- using a diary, wall calendar, white board or electronic calendar to keep track of tasks and activities such as workdays, household chores, regular groups and other social activities
- ensuring regular activities happen on the same day each week – eg always having their shopping delivered on a Wednesday
- having a set place for important items like glasses, keys, wallet and phone so they can be found easily and are less likely to be misplaced
- sticking labels or photos to cupboard doors as a reminder of what is inside
- writing simple instructions for appliances like the washing machine, dishwasher and microwave and keeping them next to the appliance
- speaking to the GP about setting up repeat prescription deliveries so the person does not run out of any regular medication

If the person needs to attend medical appointments alone, some hospitals have volunteer drivers who can provide transport. They can also ask doctors and other healthcare professionals like opticians to



write down what was discussed and details of any follow-up so they can remember the information and share it with a family member.

### **Keeping socially active**

Some people thrive on living alone and enjoy their independence and their own company. However, others feel lonely and isolated, which could lead to depression and affect their ability to manage.

If possible, the person should continue with their usual social activities, with adaptations if necessary. This will help them maintain their self-esteem and connection with others. It may be beneficial for them to tell close friends about their diagnosis so they can offer support, for example by giving them a lift to activities if they cannot get there alone.

Local dementia support groups can be great places to meet people in a similar situation. There may also be a local befriending service where a volunteer can speak regularly to the person with dementia by phone, visit them at home or accompany them to an activity or appointment.

When you and other family members and friends visit the person, it is natural to want to help them practically, for example by doing some cleaning, gardening or washing. But try to ensure you also spend quality time together, such as taking them out for a meal, to the hairdresser or to watch a film or sporting event.

### Tracking the person's abilities

It is important to regularly review how the person is coping on their own and assess whether they need extra support. You can do this by visiting when you can and talking to them openly about anything they are finding challenging. You can also ask family and friends who live near the person to update you if they have concerns.

People with dementia can have good days and bad days, so their ability to cope with everyday living may fluctuate. It can be tempting to take over if they seem to be struggling with a task like cooking a meal or using the washing machine, but it is better to take a step back and watch them carrying out these activities. This will help them maintain their skills and independence, and over time, help you spot any changes in their abilities.

A deterioration in the person's personal hygiene, such as wearing dirty clothes or having unwashed hair, could be a sign that they are not coping. Likewise, it may be a cause for concern if the person's home looks neglected. This may be a personal choice, but if they usually keep a clean and tidy home, dirty bathrooms and worktops, overflowing bins and unwashed dishes could be a sign that they need some extra help.

### Driving

If the person with dementia drives, they are legally required to notify the DVLA and their vehicle insurer of their diagnosis. They will not necessarily have to stop driving, but they may have to reapply for their licence or take a driving assessment.





From time to time, suggest that the person takes you on a short drive so you can look out for any issues like poor speed awareness, excessive hesitancy or getting lost. You should also check their car for new dents or scratches that might indicate they are having difficulty driving.

If you have any concerns, ask the person how they feel about their driving and explain your worries. They may be aware that it is becoming more difficult and be willing to stop. In this case, you can support them to find alternative transport such as buses and taxis so that they can continue with their regular activities.

Please see Sources on support on p17 for our leaflet on driving and dementia.

### Home safety

If you can, spend some time with the person in their home to check for any safety issues. It is also useful to give a trusted local family member, friend or neighbour a spare set of keys, or use a key safe with a passcode that you can give them, in case a problem arises.

If the person is becoming less mobile, consider installing accessible features like a walk-in shower, stair lift or handrails. Home safety devices such as anti-flood plugs and gas valve limiters that prevent gas hobs being left on accidentally can also give you peace of mind and reduce the risk of accident or injury if the person has memory problems. Make sure you also check smoke and carbon monoxide alarms.

Please see Sources of support on p18 for our leaflet on making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia.

### Finances

People with dementia often find it increasingly difficult to manage their finances – and if they miss important payments like rent/mortgage and bills, this may impact their ability to remain in their home.

With their permission, it may be helpful for you to support them with their finances – for example, you could set up direct debits for their regular bills and put spending caps on their cards and withdrawals so they cannot overspend.

People with dementia can be vulnerable to financial scams and other mistreatment. If you have concerns, you could discuss having their post redirected to a family member, having access to their email and bank accounts, and asking neighbours to keep an eye on who is visiting the property.

You could also encourage the person to sign up for schemes like the Mail Preference Service and Telephone Preference Service to stop them receiving unwanted marketing calls and post – please see Sources of support on p19.





### Deciding when extra support is needed

You or other family members or friends may be able to offer enough support for the person with dementia to live alone for longer, for example by visiting regularly to help out, hiring a cleaner or gardener or arranging meals on wheels.

But as the person's dementia progresses, they may need professional support at home. It is a good idea to start thinking about this at an early stage, with their full involvement. This will give them the chance to share their views and come to terms with any changes that might be needed; and prevent having to make decisions in a crisis.

To establish whether the person with dementia needs support at home, you can request a needs assessment through social services. If the assessor recommends support from a home carer, the person's finances will be assessed to see whether they will have to pay for this themselves, or whether the local council will partly or fully cover the cost.

Please see Sources of support on p18 for details of our leaflet on finding help and support at home.

Many people with dementia who live alone are reluctant to accept extra support. They may not like the idea of being ‘looked after’ or believe they need it. Try to approach this sensitively, taking into account their feelings and wishes – for example, they could be involved in deciding what they would like with help with or meeting potential carers.

You could talk to the person about the benefits of getting support – for example, having help with tasks that they find difficult could relieve any stress or anxiety and free up time for other activities they enjoy. Home care – whether from a family member, friend or professional – can also be a valuable source of companionship.

If possible, phase in any changes gradually and positively – the person may only need support for a few hours a week at first, but this can be increased as their needs grow.

### **When living alone is no longer possible**

There is no fixed point at which it is no longer practical or safe for a person with dementia to live alone. However, you might want to consider their ability to:

- make everyday decisions
- prepare food
- eat without support
- take medication correctly
- maintain personal hygiene
- leave their home without support

There are many factors involved in making decisions about the person's care needs, including the level of family support and their financial situation. It may be possible for them to remain at home with increased support – for example from a family member who could move in temporarily, or a live-in carer.

In some cases, moving into an assisted living facility or retirement property can be a positive next step, helping the person retain their independence, but with easy access to support when needed. Supported living often also offers good opportunities to meet other people and take part in enjoyable activities.

Some people's needs increase to the point that they need to move from living alone to living in a care or nursing home. There is more information in our leaflets on choosing a care home and choosing a care home for a person with young onset dementia – please see Sources of support on p17.

Moving to a new home may be disorientating for a person with dementia, so it is a good idea to research what options are available in good time, so you do not have to make decisions in an emergency. This will also allow the person to be fully involved in the process, visiting potential properties with you and sharing their views about where they would feel most comfortable.

Deciding that a person can no longer live alone can be difficult for you and them. If you need support, our dementia specialist Admiral Nurses are here to help – please see Sources of support on p17 for information.

## **Living alone with young onset dementia**

Many people with young onset dementia (where symptoms develop under the age of 65) live alone. They are likely to be physically fitter and more mobile than older people with dementia, which may increase how long they are able to live independently for.

The type of dementia the person is diagnosed with may influence their ability to live alone. For example, younger people often have rarer forms of dementia where memory is less affected in the early stages, which may make it easier and safer to live alone.

However, some types of dementia, such as frontotemporal dementia – which is most common in people aged 45-65 – can cause difficulties with things like focusing on tasks, planning and decision-making, which could impact their ability to manage on their own.

It is important to help the person with young onset dementia maintain their independence and lifestyle while living alone. This will involve weighing up the benefits of an activity (eg the person taking the bus alone) with the risks (eg getting on the wrong bus). The aim is not to eliminate all risk, but to decide whether the positives outweigh the negatives.

Having these discussions together can ease some of your worries about them living and taking part in activities alone, while also helping them retain their self-esteem, confidence and independence.

In the early stages, younger people with dementia may still be working. It is a good idea to encourage the person to tell their



employer and close colleagues about their diagnosis so they can implement any support and adaptations that the person needs to keep working.

You could also ask the person's permission for you to make contact and keep in touch with their manager or a trusted colleague yourself, so they can let you know if they are concerned about any changes in the person's skills or abilities. This means you can open up conversations with the person about anything they are finding difficult and ask if they would like your help with advocating for them at work. Please see Sources of support on p17 for our information on employment and dementia.

It is very important for a person with young onset dementia who lives alone to have a good social network and continue with activities that maintain their independence and a sense of

purpose – such as working; driving; going to the pub, theatre or sports matches; and going on daytrips or on holiday. This will help to prevent loneliness and provide opportunities and encouragement to leave their home safely.

As the person's abilities change, you may need to talk to them about how they could adapt or replace these activities. For example, if you are concerned about them losing their way if they go for a run or bike ride alone, you could suggest that they go with a friend or join a club.

Younger people with dementia may have significant financial commitments such as paying a mortgage/rent and paying into a pension, so they may need support to ensure payments are made accurately and on time. You could suggest sitting down together and looking at ways to make it easier for them to manage their money, for example setting up direct debits for their regular bills. Please see finances on p8 for more information.

Younger people are likely to be very familiar with using technology like smartphones, smart speakers and satnavs. These can be a great help in their everyday life, although you may need to work together to make adaptations as time passes – for example, they may need help with setting reminders or managing their calendar.

If the person uses social media, you could encourage them to keep doing this so they maintain connections and feel less isolated. You could also ask other family members and friends to keep in touch with them via social media or messaging apps.

As young onset dementia is relatively rare, attending a young onset dementia support group to meet others experiencing similar situations can be very beneficial. These may be





face-to-face or online. Please see Sources of support on p18 for details of our database of young onset dementia support groups and services.

The person may also benefit from joining a group that is not specifically for people with dementia – such as a choir, gardening club or sports group – to help them build a supportive network and maintain an identity outside having dementia. You could offer to help with this, for example by researching groups in their area.

If the person provides childcare to family members, you may need to have a conversation about whether it is realistic and safe for them to continue this alone as their symptoms advance.

If you need any support around living alone with young onset dementia, please contact our dementia specialist Admiral Nurses for advice – see Sources of support on p17.



## Sources of support

If you are living with dementia or caring for someone with the condition, register for our free online sessions, ‘Dementia: what next?’ at [▶ dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next](https://dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next)

To contact our free Dementia Helpline, call **0800 888 6678** (Monday–Friday 9am–9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am–5pm, every day except 25<sup>th</sup> December) or email [▶ helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

If you prefer, you can book a phone or video call with an Admiral Nurse at a time to suit you: please visit [▶ dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

### Dementia UK resources

#### Caring from a distance

[▶ dementiauk.org/caring-from-a-distance](https://dementiauk.org/caring-from-a-distance)

#### Choosing a care home for a person with young onset dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/young-onset-dementia-choosing-a-care-home](https://dementiauk.org/young-onset-dementia-choosing-a-care-home)

#### Considering a care home for a person with dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/considering-a-care-home](https://dementiauk.org/considering-a-care-home)

#### Driving and dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/driving](https://dementiauk.org/driving)

#### Employment and young onset dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/employment](https://dementiauk.org/employment)

#### Financial and legal sources of support

[▶ dementiauk.org/financial-and-legal-sources-of-support](https://dementiauk.org/financial-and-legal-sources-of-support)



### **Finance and young onset dementia**

➤ [dementiauk.org/finance-and-young-onset-dementia](https://dementiauk.org/finance-and-young-onset-dementia)

### **Finding help and support at home**

➤ [dementiauk.org/finding-help-and-support-at-home](https://dementiauk.org/finding-help-and-support-at-home)

### **Lasting power of attorney**

➤ [dementiauk.org/lasting-power](https://dementiauk.org/lasting-power)

### **Living aids and assistive technology**

➤ [dementiauk.org/living-aids-and-assistive-technology](https://dementiauk.org/living-aids-and-assistive-technology)

### **Making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia**

➤ [dementiauk.org/making-the-home-safe-and-comfortable](https://dementiauk.org/making-the-home-safe-and-comfortable)

### **Risk assessing the home for a person with dementia**

➤ [dementiauk.org/risk](https://dementiauk.org/risk)

### **Young onset dementia support groups and services database**

➤ [dementiauk.org/find-support](https://dementiauk.org/find-support)

## Other resources

### Befriending Networks

- [befriending.co.uk/about/find-a-befriender](https://befriending.co.uk/about/find-a-befriender)

### Dementia Toolkit: everyday independence

- [livingwithdementiatoolkit.org.uk/stay-safe-and-well/everyday-independence/](https://livingwithdementiatoolkit.org.uk/stay-safe-and-well/everyday-independence/)

### Find your local social services

- [nhs.uk/service-search/other-health-services/local-authority-adult-social-care](https://nhs.uk/service-search/other-health-services/local-authority-adult-social-care)

### Independent Age

- [independentage.org](https://independentage.org)

### Mail Preference Service

- [mpsonline.org.uk](https://mpsonline.org.uk)

### The needs assessment

- [nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/help-from-social-services-and-charities/getting-a-needs-assessment/](https://nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/help-from-social-services-and-charities/getting-a-needs-assessment/)

### Telephone Preference Service

- [tpsonline.org.uk](https://tpsonline.org.uk)

**To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse  
about any aspect of dementia:**

Contact our Helpline:  
**0800 888 6678 or [helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)**

Book a virtual appointment:  
**[dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)**

**Our charity relies entirely on donations to fund our  
life-changing work. If you would like to donate to help us  
support more families:**

- Call **0300 365 5500**
- Visit **[dementiauk.org/donate](https://dementiauk.org/donate)**
- Scan the QR code

**Thank you.**



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