

Dementia and personal hygiene



As a person's dementia progresses, they may need more assistance with their personal care. Poor personal hygiene can lead to an increased risk of infection and skin damage, and it can also be a source of embarrassment for the person with dementia and those around them.

Maintaining hygiene is usually a very private and personal activity and helping someone with such intimate tasks can cause distress for both the person with dementia and their carer. Everyone will have their own unique challenges, but understanding why these changes are occurring and making some adjustments to the person's usual routines can make the situation less stressful for everyone.

Challenges in personal hygiene

Families and carers can face many challenges when assisting a person with personal hygiene. A common problem is the person with dementia saying that they have already had a bath/shower and changed their clothes when

you know they have not. This typically happens because they truly believe that they have performed these tasks.

Contradicting the person may upset them, and they may feel offended if you point out problems with their personal hygiene. Sometimes taking 10 minutes out, asking for their help with another basic task and then reapproaching the subject can be useful.

It is common for a person with dementia to refuse help with personal care. Some people find it easier to accept help from a family member, while others prefer to be supported by a paid carer. They may be more comfortable with someone of the same sex.

Try not to feel guilty if you decide you need professional help. Paid carers are experienced in helping people with personal hygiene, and having someone take over these tasks can reduce stress for both you and the person with dementia.

It may take time and a variety of different approaches to find a personal care routine that works for you and the person with



dementia. If you need support, please speak to your GP or social worker. You can also speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse for advice – please see Sources of support on p11.

Continence

As dementia progresses, the person may:

- not recognise the urge to use the toilet
- not remember when they last used the toilet, or where it is

- develop mobility problems that make it difficult to get to the toilet in time, sit or stand, or clean themselves afterwards
- hide soiled clothing or not admit to being incontinent because they are embarrassed or do not realise that they are wet or soiled

Going to the toilet is a deeply personal and private matter, which can make it difficult for the person to accept assistance. If you ask them outright if they need the toilet, they may say no. They may

be more receptive if you ask them in a more subtle way, such as, “Do you want to use the toilet before we go out?”

If the person needs support with using the toilet, try to provide only as much help as is necessary and encourage them to do what they can independently. If you need to remain in the bathroom with them, standing to the side or with your back to them rather than directly in front of them will help maintain their dignity.

If the person is having issues with continence, it is worth discussing these with the GP. They may be able to make a referral to the local continence service for advice and support, including around incontinence products. Please see Sources of support on p11 for our information on continence.

Washing

People with dementia may struggle with washing their hands, body or hair. Prompting them may be helpful, giving one instruction at a time. For example, when helping them wash their hands, you could

ask them to turn on the tap, open their hands, put the soap onto their hands, rub their hands together, then rinse and dry them.

If this proves difficult, you could encourage the person to use hand sanitiser or antibacterial wipes instead. Again, involve the person in the process as much as possible – you could wash, wipe or sanitise your own hands to demonstrate what to do.

When supporting a person to have a bath or shower, be respectful of their usual preferences – if they have always preferred a bath, they may be reluctant to use the shower. If using a shower, they may feel more comfortable and safer using a shower seat.

Sometimes, difficulties with spatial awareness and depth perception can affect personal hygiene. Allowing the person to feel the water and its depth in a bath, or running the shower over their hands before they get in, may help them prepare for what to expect. The person may prefer to use a handheld shower rather than stand under a powerful shower stream.

Try to use the person's usual toiletries to provide familiarity and consistency. Make sure everything you need is to hand and offer prompts throughout the process – this gives them a task to focus on and promotes independence.

If the person is embarrassed about showing their body or being washed, you could put a towel over their lap or shoulders to help them maintain some dignity, washing one part of their body at a time.

If the person is very resistant to having a bath or shower, a sponge bath may be less stressful. You can also buy toiletries designed for people who find bathing and showering difficult, such as waterless shampoo and body wash.

Cutting and cleaning nails

It can be challenging to help a person living with dementia cut and clean their fingernails and toenails. You could try these tips:

- Try cleaning and cutting nails after a bath or shower – as well as removing dirt, the water will soften the nails so they are

easier to cut. Alternatively, you could encourage the person to soak their hands and feet first

- Giving the person a gentle hand massage may help them relax
- Some people enjoy choosing and wearing nail varnish, so you may be able to make cleaning and cutting nails part of a manicure
- If the person is becoming stressed, take a break then try again
- Look for a local chiropodist or podiatrist with experience in working with people with dementia to help with nailcare

Washing and cutting hair

Some people with dementia enjoy having their hair washed, cut and styled, but others find it stressful. Keep in mind that hair usually does not need washing as frequently as the body – once a week may be sufficient.

Encourage the person to be as independent as possible when washing their hair. Give step-by-step instructions and let them do as much as they can themselves

– for example, they may be able to shampoo their hair but need you to help rinse it out.

The person may prefer to wash their hair in the bath rather than in the shower. If they do not like water on their face, you could use a shampoo shield or they could hold a dry flannel over their face. Using a handheld shower or a large plastic jug to rinse the person's hair could reduce discomfort.

If the person is reluctant to have their hair cut, going with them and having your hair cut too may make the experience more positive and can be seen as a 'treat' or part of a day out together.

Alternatively, having a mobile hairdresser visit the person at home may reduce stress. Some care homes have their own hairdresser or salon specialising in working with people with dementia.

Always make sure you respect the person's preferences with their hair. If they have long hair, for example, it may be tempting to cut it short so it needs less upkeep, but keeping their usual hairstyle

and colour is an important part of maintaining self-esteem.

Shaving and hair removal

These tips may make shaving and hair removal easier:

- Encourage the person with dementia to use an electric razor – this is safer than using a traditional razor and can help them maintain their independence for longer
- If the person is used to shaving with a traditional razor, they may need help with this
- Make sure you have everything prepared in advance and if necessary, talk the person through the process step by step
- If you need to shave the person, asking for their help with a certain aspect (eg, "Can you hold the towel for me?") can make them feel included and respected. You can buy razors that are specially designed for carers to use on the person they care for
- People who use wax, hair removal cream or devices such



as epilators can continue to use these for as long as possible, with support where necessary

- If they go to a salon for hair removal, they can continue to do so for as long as they are comfortable. Keeping to their usual routines will provide familiarity and maintain self-esteem

Dressing and cleanliness

People with dementia may find it hard to accept help with dressing and cleanliness, so it is important to take the time to make them feel

comfortable and encourage their independence. These tips may help with choosing clothes and dressing:

- Too many choices may overwhelm a person living with dementia – however, it is important that they are allowed to make their own decisions about what to wear. Try offering a choice of two outfits so they can decide which to wear
- Label drawers and wardrobes with pictures of what is inside to help the person find what they need

- It may be helpful to lay the person's clothing out in the order they would put the items on
- Some people with dementia like to wear the same clothes all the time. If so, you could buy several identical sets of clothes – when they are in the bath or in bed, you can swap the dirty outfit for a clean one
- New or gifted clothing can be used to encourage someone to change, for example, “I would love to see you wearing the new trousers we bought you”
- Encouraging the person to wear a particular outfit for a visit or outing could prompt them to change their clothing
- Look for clothing that is easy to put on and take off – drawstring waists and Velcro fastenings may be easier than zips and buttons

Young onset dementia and personal hygiene

Supporting a person with young onset dementia (where symptoms develop before the age of 65) with personal hygiene can have its own challenges.

It is important to recognise that a younger person may have different routines and expectations around their personal care and grooming to older people, for example around hairstyle and colour, makeup choices, facial hair and hair removal.

Always try to respect these preferences and support the person to continue with them – for instance, you could help them put on makeup, colour their hair, trim their beard or remove body hair. Being able to express themselves through their clothes and personal appearance will help them maintain their sense of identity and self-esteem.

Supporting a person with dementia with periods

If a person with young onset dementia is still having periods, this can present additional challenges with personal care. While it is important to respect their wishes around sanitary protection, you may need to rethink which products to use. For example, if you need to help them change their



protection, pads may be more appropriate than tampons.

Using a smartphone app to track the person's cycle so they know roughly when to expect their period can be helpful. Setting reminders to change protection may also be useful.

Bear in mind that periods usually change during perimenopause – for example becoming lighter, heavier or less regular. The person may need your help to understand what is happening and how to manage the changes.

Please see Sources of support on p11 for information on young onset dementia, perimenopause and menopause.

Young carers and personal care

If a person with dementia is having difficulties with personal hygiene, this can be very challenging for any children or young people in their family. They may be embarrassed to be seen with the person with dementia if they appear unkempt and unwilling to spend time with them if their standards of hygiene have slipped.



It is important to explain in an age-appropriate way that the changes are the result of the person's dementia and that they are not neglecting themselves deliberately. If the child finds it upsetting to be around their family member because of poor personal hygiene, you could support the person with dementia to wash and change their clothes before they spend time together.

In some cases – particularly if a parent has young onset dementia – a child or young person may end up helping with personal care. This can be distressing for everyone

involved, so think about what tasks are and are not suitable for the child to help with. For example, helping their parent use the toilet may not be appropriate, but they may like to help them choose clothes or brush their hair.

A child or young person who supports a person with dementia is entitled to a young carer's assessment to establish what help they may need. You can request this from your local social services. Your GP or social worker may also be able to suggest young carers' groups where the young person can find support.

Sources of support

To speak to a specialist dementia nurse about personal hygiene 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-an-appointment

Dementia UK resources

Continence

dementiauk.org/continence

Living aids and assistive technology

dementiauk.org/living-aids-and-assistive-technology

Mouth care

dementiauk.org/mouth-care

Perimenopause and menopause

dementiauk.org/dementia-and-menopause

Stoma care for people with dementia

dementiauk.org/caring-for-a-person-with-a-stoma-and-dementia

Young onset dementia section

dementiauk.org/young-onset-dementia

Other resources

Independent Living – buyers’ guide to assistive living products
independentliving.co.uk/independent-living-products

Living Made Easy – daily living aids database
livingmadeeasy.org.uk

NHS: being a young carer – your rights
nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/support-and-benefits-for-carers/being-a-young-carer-your-rights

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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