

Dementia and difficulty with sounds



Dementia can affect how people interpret information from the senses. This can make it difficult to make sense of sounds, even if the person does not have problems with their hearing.

People often experience some degree of hearing loss as they get older, but dementia may cause additional difficulties in people of any age which are not related to changes in the ears themselves. They may:

- have trouble working out what is said to them and need longer to process it
- struggle to distinguish between multiple sounds or conversations
- be startled or frightened by loud or sudden noises
- have problems identifying what a sound is, or distinguishing one sound from another

As a result, it may be difficult for the person to process and understand what they are hearing and communicate their response. This could lead to them becoming withdrawn and socially isolated, and trigger feelings of anxiety, frustration, confusion and distress.

Keep in mind, though, that not all sounds are problematic for a person with dementia. For example, hearing a piece of music from their youth or a special time in their life may provide comfort and relaxation, and sounds of nature such as birds singing or a water feature in a garden can be soothing and provide gentle sensory stimulation.

Hearing loss and dementia

Recent studies have revealed that people with hearing loss appear to have an increased risk of developing dementia. It is not clear yet if hearing loss makes it more likely that someone will develop



dementia, or if dementia itself makes it more difficult for people to hear.

If someone appears to be having hearing difficulties, it is important to book a hearing test. The person may simply have a build-up of wax, a cold or ear infection that is affecting their hearing; or they may have age-related hearing loss and benefit from using a hearing aid.

Hearing tests are available in many large pharmacies and opticians. These are often free, particularly for older people, and can usually be booked at relatively short notice. Alternatively, the person can be referred by their GP to an audiologist (hearing specialist) for a free NHS hearing test, although this may involve a longer wait.

Some audiologists specialise in treating people with dementia and can tailor hearing tests to meet their needs. If a person with

dementia is diagnosed with hearing loss and needs a hearing aid, this may be hard for them to adapt to, so a dementia specialist audiologist can provide extra support and advice.

If the person is already a hearing aid user, it is important to keep their hearing aid maintained and check it regularly to make sure it is working properly. Hearing aid batteries need to be changed frequently, and hearing aids often beep when they need to be changed, which may cause confusion.

Ways you can help

If you believe that someone with dementia is struggling to hear, understand and process sounds and communicate, try to recognise this and respond sensitively. These tips may help.

Avoiding distress

If the person with dementia finds noise overwhelming or distressing, try to avoid places with loud or distracting background noise, such as restaurants and shopping centres, which might overwhelm and confuse them. If you do go to these places, then try to choose quieter times. Wearing ear plugs, ear defenders or noise-cancelling headphones may help but be aware that these could make communication harder.

In noisy social situations such as parties and weddings, try to provide a quiet place for the person with dementia to take time out, such as a spare room.

Some larger supermarkets have 'quiet hours' that offer a calmer shopping environment, with music turned down and other noises kept to a minimum. You can check with your local supermarket if this is available. Cinemas and theatres may also offer performances for people with dementia and other sensory issues, with reduced volume and the lights left on.



Try to avoid loud and unexpected noises such as slamming doors, fireworks, crackers and party poppers.

Sometimes people with dementia hear sounds but are unable to give them context. For example, a washing machine beeping or car doors slamming could cause anxiety if they do not understand the cause of the noise. Explain what is happening and calmly reassure them that there is nothing to worry about.

Supporting communication and understanding

Turn off the television, radio or background music when you are talking to the person with dementia to avoid distractions and help them concentrate on what you are saying. Face the person and make eye contact: 60-80% of communication is non-verbal, and you can convey a lot through your tone of voice, gestures and body language.

Speak slowly and clearly, using simple words. Give the person time to process what they are hearing and to react/respond. Do not be too quick to jump in and ask them if they have heard and understood you. However, if, after a pause, the person seems not to have heard you or is having difficulty making sense of what you said, you may wish to prompt them gently – but be aware that some people find this frustrating and belittling.

Many people with dementia find it easier to understand written, rather than spoken, words, so you could try writing things down if the person is struggling to hear or interpret what you are saying. You could also use pictures to support communication, for example showing them pictures of food and drink to find out what they would prefer.

Tell other family members and friends what they can do to help the person with dementia with understanding and processing sounds, for example what communication strategies work well. If there are children or teenagers in the home, explain that the person has difficulty with sounds and suggest how they can help, for example by using headphones for listening to music or playing computer games, and avoiding speaking over each other.

If the person works, it is helpful for them to tell their employer and colleagues about their dementia diagnosis and any difficulties with hearing or processing sound so they can put processes in place to support them, for example emailing them details of a task rather than telling them verbally.

It is also a good idea for someone to attend medical and other appointments with the person with dementia to help them communicate and understand key information.



Assistive technology

It is important to consider the person's safety if they are having difficulty processing sounds – for instance, they may not recognise a smoke alarm beeping. If this is the case, there are telecare systems that link to smoke alarms/carbon monoxide detectors and alert a call centre if they are activated. If the person you care for would benefit from this, contact your local authority's Social Services department.

If the person has difficulty processing sounds like the phone ringing or a kitchen timer sounding, consider using devices or settings with other ways of alerting them such as vibrating or flashing. If they struggle to use the phone, adjusting the ring tone and speaker volume may help. For some people, communicating by text or email is easier.



Deafness and dementia

If a person was deaf before their diagnosis of dementia and is a British Sign Language (BSL) user, they may need more specialist support. For example, if they have a home carer or live in a care home, it is helpful if their carer understands sign language. They may need to learn some basic signs, such as ‘toilet’, ‘thirsty’, ‘hungry’, or they could use pictures to help with communication.

Just as hearing people with dementia may develop difficulties communicating verbally, BSL users may experience communication difficulties such as forgetting or mixing up signs. Some people may revert to signs they used in childhood or have reduced hand movements. Giving the person lots of time for communication, and being aware of non-verbal cues – such as pointing, gestures or facial expressions – can be helpful.

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 speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse, call our free Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday-Friday 9am–9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am–5pm, every day except 25th 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

Changes in perception and hallucinations

[▶ dementiauk.org/changes-in-perception](https://dementiauk.org/changes-in-perception)

Getting the best out of GP and other health appointments

[▶ dementiauk.org/getting-the-best-out-of-gp-and-other-health-appointments](https://dementiauk.org/getting-the-best-out-of-gp-and-other-health-appointments)

Making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/safe-comfortable-home](https://dementiauk.org/safe-comfortable-home)

Music and dementia

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

Tips for better communication

[▶ dementiauk.org/better-communication](https://dementiauk.org/better-communication)

Other resources

British Deaf Association

➤ bda.org.uk

British Sign: learn British Sign Language

➤ british-sign.co.uk

NHS: hearing tests

➤ nhs.uk/conditions/hearing-tests

ReSound: find a UK audiologist

➤ resound.com/en-gb/find-a-professional

RNID: the national hearing loss charity

➤ rnid.org.uk

RNID: free online hearing check

➤ rnid.org.uk/information-and-support/take-online-hearing-check





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

Contact our Helpline:

0800 888 6678 or ➔ **helpline@dementiauk.org**

Book a virtual appointment:

➔ **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**
- Scan the QR code



Thank you.



dementiauk.org • info@dementiauk.org

Publication date: November 2025. Review date: November 2028. © Dementia UK 2025

Dementia UK, 7th Floor, One Aldgate, London EC3N 1RE
Dementia UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1039404) and Scotland (SC 047429).