

Sport and dementia



Sport and physical activity can be a meaningful and integral part of people's lives. Many people with dementia enjoy participating in sports, or have participated in the past, whether at an amateur or professional level. But as their condition progresses, this may become harder due to changes in cognition (their ability to remember, think and communicate) or physical health. Family and friends may also worry about the person's safety when taking part in sport.

In addition, there is growing concern about the disproportionate number of cases of dementia becoming known in players of contact sports. Please see p10 for more information.

However, staying involved in sport and physical activity – whether or not they participate directly – can have significant benefits for the person with dementia and their carers, improving their physical, psychological and social wellbeing.

The role of sport for people with dementia

Many people living with dementia have participated in sport during childhood, throughout their adult lives and often into retirement. In many cases, this can carry on in some form after their diagnosis, with adaptations when needed.

Taking part in sport and physical activity has many benefits for a person with dementia, including:

- reducing the risk of health conditions like heart disease, type two diabetes, stroke and certain forms of cancer, and maintaining a healthy weight
- maintaining strength, balance, movement and motor skills, making it easier for the person to stay independent in their daily activities, remain mobile for as long as possible, and reduce the risk of falls



- reducing the risk of depression and anxiety and helping with managing stress
- giving the person with dementia a sense of structure, purpose and identity beyond their diagnosis
- increasing their confidence, motivation and self-esteem
- providing the person with dementia and their carers with vital opportunities for social interaction and companionship, helping to prevent loneliness and isolation
- keeping the person connected with current and former teammates, friends and their club community
- helping them feel valued and included through membership of a club or association

Participating in sport can be a joint activity that the person living with dementia and their family members and friends can do together. If they have children or teenagers, activities like swimming, family bike rides and badminton can provide vital opportunities for connection and maintain a sense of normality.

Sport can be an important tool for encouraging reminiscence. Sharing sporting memories can help the person with dementia connect with their past. It can encourage communication, provide opportunities for connection, help the person maintain their cognitive abilities and enhance their mood and wellbeing.

Many people with dementia have previously held meaningful roles related to their sport, for example in coaching, leadership or club administration. With support and adaptations, some people may be able to continue with these roles for some time, helping them stay mentally active and giving them a sense of worth and purpose.

The impact of dementia on sport

Dementia can affect a person's ability to participate in sport, especially as the condition progresses. Their performance may be affected, they may struggle to remember and follow rules, and they may become less mobile and more prone to falls.

Environmental factors like bright light and noise could trigger anxiety and distress. And communication, mood and behaviour may be affected, which could lead to the person becoming frustrated and behaving in ways that breach the sporting code of conduct.

Over time, the person with dementia is likely to become unable to take part in sports they previously enjoyed or continue with their duties in their club or sporting organisation. It may be difficult for the person to accept and adjust to these changes, particularly if they are



younger and still feel physically fit enough to participate in their usual sport, at the same level.

The person with dementia should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and views about how their involvement in sport and physical activity is changing. You may need to help them explore why participating in sport or with duties at their club or association may be difficult and/or unsafe.

It is important to offer alternative opportunities if the person living with dementia can no longer participate in their previous sport or hold the same position in their club or organisation. There may be other ways to stay involved, for example through socialising with teammates and club members; volunteering in roles with less responsibility; or simply spectating. This will enable sport to remain a part of the person's life, giving them purpose, social contact and stimulation.

Supporting a person with dementia to participate in sport

Depending on the person's stage of dementia and their individual needs, they may be able to actively participate in sport for some time, with adaptations. These tips may help the person continue taking part in sport:

- Start by thinking about the person and their relationship to sport – for example their likes and dislikes, preferences and what matters to them
- Has a particular sport played an important part in the person's life? If so, find out about their level of participation, their current interest in it, and their motivation and ability to take part
- Explore different types of sporting opportunities in the person's local area
- Think about whether the person could participate in a mainstream sport, or whether an adapted version would be more suitable, for example walking football or dementia-specific exercise classes
- If the person's chosen activity involves individual participation (such as cycling or running), consider whether they can do it alone or whether they will need support to keep them safe, for example from a running or cycling buddy, guide or companion
- If their chosen sport is a group- or team-based activity, think about how to make this work – for example, they could play with a family member or club members who know them well, play in friendly games rather than competitions, or choose times when venues are less busy



- Support the person with dementia to play at their own pace and at a manageable level to help them enjoy the experience
- If they have children or grandchildren, the person may be able to take part in informal and non-competitive sporting activities with them, at a gentler pace
- Take time to listen, be patient and relaxed, and offer reassurance to help the person feel comfortable and safe
- You may need to provide some support to help the person understand the rules of the game – if so, keep the information clear and concise
- Remember to have fun, smile, and laugh together

Tips for helping a person with dementia stay connected to sport

If the person with dementia can no longer directly participate in sport or physical activity, there are still many ways for them to stay involved with this meaningful part of their life.

- Encourage the person to visit their local sports club socially, for example to meet family, friends and teammates for a meal or drink in the clubhouse
- If the person finds noise and large groups of people overwhelming, they could visit at quieter times when the venue is less busy
- Orientate the person to the different areas in the club, for example the toilet, quiet spaces, communal rooms
- Ask the person if you can talk to club staff and members about their diagnosis and dementia in general – let them know how their condition affects them and pass on advice for how to support them, such as tips for communication
- Encourage former teammates and other club members to talk to the person – you could suggest conversation prompts linked to their sporting background
- Reminiscence can be helpful for many people with dementia, so you could talk about sporting memories, watch videos of past games or famous sporting events, and look at old programmes
- Show the person around the club; look at team photographs and trophies and talk about the memories they evoke
- If the person has children or grandchildren, support them to attend school sports day, watch classes, matches or events that they participate in, attend sporting fixtures together, or simply talk to them about their favourite sports and teams



- If the person can no longer visit sports clubs or matches, try to bring sport into their home or care home, for example through watching events on television or online, such as on YouTube, or displaying memorabilia in their room

Attending sporting events

Supporting a sports team is an important part of many people's lives. With support, the person with dementia may still be able to attend sporting fixtures. Speak to the club about the assistance the person might need and find out about any help they can offer on matchdays – for example a buddy scheme or access to a dedicated area for people with disabilities.

It is a good idea for the person to carry ID that states their name and diagnosis. They can show this to a staff member or fellow spectator if they need support, and it can help to reunite them with their

companion if they become separated. They may also wish to wear a sunflower lanyard, which will alert people to the fact that they have a hidden disability – please see Sources of support on p14.

Family areas of sporting venues often have a calmer atmosphere, so if the person with dementia has children or grandchildren, they could attend events together and sit in these quieter seats.

If the person finds large events overwhelming, you could try taking them to smaller matches at a local club or grassroots team. This can help them enjoy the matchday experience with people who they know well, and who will look out for them.

Sporting initiatives for people with dementia

Many sports clubs, foundations and trusts across the country have initiatives for people with dementia and their family and friends.

These include:

- social groups and gatherings to meet others in similar situations
- dementia-inclusive activities like adapted sports sessions
- sporting memories sessions to encourage reminiscence
- physical activity sessions to improve fitness and health.

Please contact your local sports club or organisation to see if it offers activities like these.

Some leisure centres also run activities for people with dementia, such as quiet sessions or adapted sports. Please contact your local centre to ask about any initiatives.

Sport and neurodegenerative conditions

Some research has shown that professional sportspeople and elite athletes who have played contact sports could be at increased risk of



developing neurological and neurodegenerative conditions such as dementia (including rarer types of dementia) and Parkinson's. These people and their families often need additional specialist support around dementia and brain health.

If you have any concerns about dementia in a current or former player of sport, please contact Dementia UK's Consultant Admiral Nurse for Sport and Dementia – see below.

Dementia UK's Consultant Admiral Nurse Service for Sport and Dementia

Current and former sportspeople – whether professional or amateur – who are living with dementia often need expert support from a specialist who understands the unique challenges they face. Their family carers may also need personalised support in adjusting to or managing the person's dementia symptoms.

Dementia UK's Consultant Admiral Nurse Service for Sport and Dementia provides specialist support for people living with all types of dementia who have an association to sport, and their families and others close to them. This includes:

- advice on symptoms, changes in behaviour, care and management
- strategies for managing roles and relationships
- emotional support
- support if the person is admitted to hospital or a care home
- information and signposting to other support services
- help with future planning, for example advance care planning

If you would like to speak to the Consultant Admiral Nurse for Sport and Dementia, please contact Dementia UK's free Helpline – see opposite.

The Consultant Admiral Nurse for Sport and Dementia also collaborates with sporting services and organisations to help them develop their services for people living with dementia. If you are interested in how we can support your organisation, please email

➤ [**info@dementiauk.org**](mailto:info@dementiauk.org)

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

Getting to know you: Joe Costello, Consultant Admiral Nurse for Sport and Dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/getting-to-know-you-joe-costello](https://dementiauk.org/getting-to-know-you-joe-costello)

Moving for your mental health

[▶ dementiauk.org/moving-for-your-mental-health](https://dementiauk.org/moving-for-your-mental-health)

Staying healthy with dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/staying-healthy](https://dementiauk.org/staying-healthy)

Tips for communication

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

Walking football: Brian’s story

[▶ dementiauk.org/information-and-support/stories/brians-story](https://dementiauk.org/information-and-support/stories/brians-story)

Young onset dementia ID cards

🔗 youngdementianetwork.org/resources/young-onset-id

Other resources

Golf in Society: transforming the lives of older people and those with chronic illnesses through golf

🔗 golfinsociety.com

Hidden Disabilities sunflower scheme

🔗 hdsunflower.com

Love to Move: dementia-inclusive seated gymnastics programme

🔗 britishgymnasticsfoundation.org/lovetomove

NHS physical activity guidelines for older adults

🔗 nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-older-adults

Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) brain health

🔗 thepfa.com/players/brain-health

PFA virtual clinics: appointments with an Admiral Nurse for PFA members and families

🔗 dementiauk.org/the-professional-footballers-association-clinics

Rugby League Cares

🔗 rugbyleaguecares.org

Sporting Memories: helping older people to reminisce, replay and reconnect through sport and physical activity

🔗 sportingmemories.uk

United by dementia: accessing dementia support through football

➤ from.ncl.ac.uk/united-by-dementia-accessing-dementia-support-through-football

The Walking Football Association

➤ thewfa.co.uk



**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.



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