

How health and care professionals can help

Health and care professionals can offer advice and services to people with dementia and carers. Find out what help is available while the dementia is still at an early stage, so that you know who to turn to when the need arises.

What help is available

Services vary from area to area and they also vary in the way they are organised.

Most services are arranged through the NHS or through social services. For information on what is available locally contact your local social services department and your GP surgery as a first step.

Some services are arranged by voluntary organisations. Social services should be able to provide information, or ask at your local citizens advice bureau (see Useful contacts) or library.

Certain services may be available privately (see entries below for more information). If you decide to use someone privately, check on fees first and make sure they are appropriately qualified. A personal recommendation may be the best way to find a good private practitioner.

You may need to be persistent to get the information and help you want.

Health professionals and care professionals are being encouraged to work more closely with each other and among themselves. However, you may sometimes find that relevant information is not passed on. Try to tactfully explain the situation each time you meet a new professional to make sure that they are aware of the whole picture.

Doctors

For details of how dementia is diagnosed and changes are assessed, see the Alzheimer's Society information sheet *Diagnosis and assessment*.

General practitioners (GPs)

The GP is your first point of contact if you are worried about your own memory or concerned about someone close to you.

The GP may make a diagnosis or suggest referral to a consultant (see below) for more specialist advice or tests. You can also ask for a referral to a consultant if you feel it would be helpful.

The GP is also responsible for your general health. Consult the GP as soon as possible if you or the person you are caring for:

- feel unwell
- feel more confused or agitated than usual, or show other marked changes in behaviour – this could be a sign of illness.

The GP can also provide information on helpful services or refer you to other professionals. Ask what is available.

For more information, see the Society's information sheet *How the GP can help*.

Consultants

Consultants are qualified doctors who have had further extensive training and experience in a particular specialty. The specialty of the consultant will depend on the age and symptoms of the person being diagnosed and the way services are organised in your area. For example, the consultant may be a specialist in neurology, geriatrics or psychiatry.

- Neurologists specialise in disorders of the brain and nervous system
- Geriatricians specialise in the physical illnesses and disabilities of old age and the care of older people
- Psychiatrists diagnose and treat a wide range of mental health problems
- Old age psychiatrists are psychiatrists who have had further training in the mental health problems of older people.

The consultant works with a number of qualified doctors at various stages in their medical training. You may be seen by one of these doctors rather than the consultant, although the consultant will be responsible for your care.

Consultants usually also work with other professionals, including nurses, psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists, as part of a

team. They all contribute their own knowledge, skills and advice.

The consultant and members of the team may be able to provide information on appropriate services in your area. In some cases they may arrange services.

The consultant may prescribe drugs for people with Alzheimer's disease. These drugs are not a cure but may reduce symptoms in the short term (see the Society's information sheet *Drug treatments for Alzheimer's disease – Aricept, Exelon, Reminyl and Ebixa*).

Community nurses

Community nurses work as part of the primary care team alongside GPs, social workers and therapists.

Community mental health nurses

Community mental health nurses, also known as community psychiatric nurses (CPNs), are mental health nurses who have had further training to work in the community. They provide treatment, care and support for people with mental health problems and dementia. They carry out assessments of people at home and can advise people with dementia and their carers on ways of coping, and of improving their health and quality of life. They do not normally carry out physical nursing tasks.

CPNs may work from GP surgeries or mental health units.

You may need a referral from your GP or your consultant or you may be able to contact a CPN directly. Arrangements vary. Ask at your GP surgery.

District nurses

District nurses have had extra training in order to nurse people at home. They often work with health care assistants to provide nursing care within people's homes and local clinics. You can contact a district nurse through your GP.

Health visitors

Health visitors are nurses who have had further training to advise people in the community on preventing illness. They can provide information on local services and suggest ways of keeping well. They can also help you press for appropriate services and may sometimes initiate services, such as carers' groups, when they identify a need.

Health visitors generally work alongside GPs. Your GP practice manager should be able to tell you how to contact your local health visitor.

Practice nurses

Practice nurses work with GPs and other community nurses and carry out a range of nursing activities within the GP practice. You can contact the practice nurse at the GP surgery.

Mobility

Physiotherapists

Physiotherapists can advise on exercise for people at all stages of dementia. They can also advise carers on safe ways of helping someone to move. Home visits can be arranged.

The GP or consultant can refer you to the community physiotherapy service or the hospital physiotherapy department.

Some physiotherapists are in private practice. Look for the letters MCSP and/or SRP after their name to ensure that they are professionally qualified. The Chartered Society of Physiotherapists can tell you how to get in touch with a private physiotherapist (see Useful contacts below).

Chiropodists

Healthy pain-free feet are important in maintaining mobility. NHS chiropody services (also known as podiatry services) are restricted to those with the greatest need. Your GP can refer you. To find a private chiropodist (podiatrist), contact the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists (see Useful contacts below).

Ears, teeth, eyes and speech

Audiologists

Audiologists check for hearing problems and can fit a hearing aid, if appropriate. Once fitted, hearing aids should be checked regularly. Hearing tests, equipment and equipment checks are free on the NHS. Ask the GP for a referral to the nearest NHS hearing centre, preferably while the dementia is at an early stage.

Dentists

Professional dental advice should be obtained as soon as dementia is diagnosed. If any major treatment is needed it should be carried out as soon as possible, as dental treatment may become more difficult as dementia progresses.

Regular dental care is important to ensure that teeth and gums are healthy and that dentures, if worn, are comfortable. If you are caring for someone in the later stages of dementia you may need advice on how to clean their teeth. Ask the dentist or dental hygienist.

If the person with dementia already has a dentist whom they know and trust, they should continue to see that dentist for as long as possible. Your dentist may be able to arrange home visits, if they are needed. If not, contact your community dental service (CDS), which can cater for people who need treatment at home. NHS home visits are free but the normal charges for treatment may apply, depending on income.

Details of local NHS dentists and your local CDS can be obtained from your local primary care trust (address in the phone book) or ask at your doctor's surgery.

If you wish to consult a dentist privately check first on fees and the cost of home visits. Many NHS dental practices also do private work. It is often a good idea to have a recommendation from a friend or neighbour.

For more information, see the Society's information sheet *Dental care and dementia*.

Optometrists

Problems with sight can add to confusion. Sight should be regularly checked by an optometrist, who will also examine the eyes for signs of glaucoma, cataract and other eye and medical conditions. If you do not have an optometrist, ask your GP or a friend or neighbour for a recommendation. You will need someone who understands what examining someone with dementia may involve. Some optometrists will carry out a home visit.

Ask about fees. People over 60 are entitled to a free NHS eye examination and some people under 60 with dementia may also be entitled to a free NHS eye examination.

Speech and language therapists

Speech and language therapists can advise someone with dementia and their carer on ways of communicating more effectively and on swallowing difficulties. Your GP may be able to refer you or you can refer yourself. For details of your local speech and language therapy department, contact the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (see Useful contacts below).

Other professionals

Chartered clinical psychologists

Chartered clinical psychologists assess memory, learning abilities and other skills and offer support. They often work with consultants in memory clinics as part of a team.

Continence advisers

Most areas have a continence adviser who can advise on problems associated with incontinence. They can also give information on useful equipment ranging from commodes to incontinence pads. Your GP may refer you or you can get in touch direct. To find the address of your local continence adviser contact The Continence Foundation (see Useful contacts below).

The environmental health department is usually responsible for the collection and disposal of soiled pads. You can contact the environmental health department through your local authority or ask the health visitor or district nurse.

Dietitians

If you have any concerns about a person with dementia eating or drinking, help is available. A dietitian can provide advice and guidance about food, nutrition and issues such as a poor appetite, weight loss, weight gain, vitamins and food supplements.

A professionally qualified dietitian will have SRD after their name. Your GP or consultant can arrange for a referral to a dietitian. Some dietitians may be able to offer a domiciliary visit to people who are housebound; others may be based at a local health centre, GP practice or hospital.

Occupational therapists (OTs)

OTs can advise on adaptations and equipment and on ways of maintaining independence for as long as possible. Some OTs work for the health service and some for social services. Ask your GP, consultant or social services if you think an OT might be helpful. Some OTs work privately. To find an OT privately contact Occupational Therapists Independent Practice (see Useful contacts below).

Social care

Many helpful care services can be arranged through your local social services department. Local authorities vary in the way services are organised and the kinds of services they offer but they may include equipment and adaptations, meals on wheels, home care, respite services, day care and care in a care home.

The local authority cannot arrange services unless an assessment of the person's needs has taken place. Carers can also ask for an assessment of their own needs. For more information on an assessment ask your social services department (the address will be in the phone book under the name of your local

authority) or see the Society's information sheet *Community care assessment*.

Social workers

Social workers have specific professional training and qualifications. They may be involved in assessing needs for services and in planning, co-ordinating and advising on services. They can also offer support if you need to talk things through. Social workers are based in a wide variety of settings. These include social services departments, hospitals and care homes. To talk to a social worker, contact your social services department (the address will be in the phone book under the name of your local authority) or ask a nurse at your GP practice or hospital.

Social care workers

Social care workers work in a wide variety of settings and are known by a variety of names. Some work as home care workers or care attendants in the person's home or as residential care workers in care homes, for example. They may help with personal care such as getting the person up, washed and dressed, changing bedding and emptying commodes, doing laundry, supervising meals to make sure the person eats properly and putting them to bed at night.

Complaints

If you have a complaint about a service try to deal with the problem informally if you can. However, if you are unable to obtain satisfaction there are more formal procedures you can pursue. Most organisations have their own complaints procedure. However, these are sometimes complex so seek advice first. Your local citizens advice bureau (see Useful contacts below) or the Alzheimer's Society Helpline are good starting points.

Useful contacts

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

14 Bedford Row
London WC1R 4ED
Telephone 020 7306 6666
Website www.physio2u.co.uk

Citizens advice bureaux (CABx)

For your nearest CAB look in the telephone book, ask at your local library or consult the website at www.nacab.org.uk The website also gives details such as opening times and specialist services. Basic advice and information is available on the website at www.adviceguide.org.uk

The Continence Foundation

307 Hatton Square
16 Baldwins Gardens
London EC1 7RJ
Helpline 0845 345 0165 (weekdays 9.30am-1pm)
Email continence-help@dial.pipex.com
Website www.continence-foundation.org.uk

Occupational Therapists in Independent Practice (OTIP)

Website www.otipp.co.uk
Telephone 0800 389 4873

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

2/3 White Hart Yard
London SE1 1NX
Telephone 020 7378 1200
Email info@rcslt.org
Website www.rcslt.org

The Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists

1 Fellmongers Path
Tower Bridge Road
London SE1 3LY
Telephone 020 7234 8620
Website www.feetforlife.org

Further reading

We can provide a list of further reading on request. Please contact the librarian at the Alzheimer's Society national office on 020 7306 0606 or email library@alzheimers.org.uk

We regularly review our range of publications and welcome your comments or suggestions. Please contact the information and education team at the Alzheimer's Society national office on 020 7306 0606 or email enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk