

Living alone

If a person with dementia is living on their own, there are likely to be some concerns about their ability to cope, especially as their dementia progresses. Where possible, the person with dementia, their friends and family members and experienced professionals should discuss these concerns together.

Much can be done to enable someone with dementia to remain in their own home, even when their dementia is quite advanced.

Familiar surroundings and routines can be reassuring for people who are confused. Many people with dementia are happier if they can live in their own home for as long as possible. Some people's dementia progresses quite quickly once the person moves, either to live with a family member or to enter a care home.

However, a person with dementia who is living alone will need increasing support as their dementia progresses. Get in touch with the appropriate services at an early stage. Do not wait until a crisis develops (see the Alzheimer's Society's information sheet *Choices in care*).

What friends and family can do

It is common for one member of the family to assume responsibility for the person with dementia as the main carer, and for others to be unaware of the stress that this can cause. It is particularly exhausting when the main carer has other commitments and feels pulled in different directions.

The main carer should make it clear that they need regular support. They are entitled to a life of their own and they will not be able to help anyone if they wear themselves out.

It is usually easier for others to contribute to care if they are involved from the start. It can be a good idea to hold a family meeting at an early stage to work out what each member of the family can realistically offer, now and in the future. This may help to avoid later feelings of resentment or guilt. Support might range from regular visits or help with practical tasks, such as shopping, to financial help with care services if the person lives too far away to help directly themselves. For more information, see the Society's advice sheet *Carers – looking after yourself*.

Tell other people

Friends and family can explain the person's dementia to friends, neighbours, local shopkeepers and anyone else with whom the person has regular contact. These people may have time to chat, offer assistance in various ways or help the person if they 'wander' away from the house and forget their way home.

Ensure that helpful information is accessible

A noticeboard with helpful telephone numbers (including emergency numbers) on it may be useful for the person with dementia in the early stages, as well as for relatives or professionals visiting the home. The noticeboard could also provide information such as the location of the stopcock, the gas and electricity meters and the first aid box.

A week-at-a-time diary, containing details about who is visiting and when, can also be helpful and reassuring for the person.

Help with managing finances

It can help if all regular household bills are paid by direct debit. If this is not possible, or the person prefers to pay their own bills, the relevant gas, electricity and water companies should be informed, so that the person is not suddenly cut off.

If the person with dementia does not want to pay for outside care, or forgets to do so, payments can usually be made on their behalf.

Anyone handling money for the person with dementia should keep a careful account of what is spent to avoid any potential problems later. Family members may want to know where the money is going; the person with dementia may also forget what has been arranged and, in some cases, even become concerned that people are stealing from them.

For information on managing someone else's finances see the Society's information sheets *Legal and financial tips* and *Enduring power of attorney and receivership*.

Outside help

People with dementia do not always realise when they need help. They may find it easier to accept help if it is tactfully introduced at an early stage.

Some people may find it more helpful if a carer takes them out while someone else cleans their home, or if someone distracts them while their fridge is cleaned, although this may not be appropriate in all cases.

The person should be receiving all the benefits to which they are entitled. Disability living allowance or attendance allowance is awarded in order to pay for extra care. See the Society's information sheet *Welfare benefits*.

Carers should be aware that they may be criticised by the person with dementia and that their attempts to help may sometimes be ignored. Although this can be hurtful, it should not be taken personally. The person with dementia may not always understand or remember everything that is being done for them.

Home care workers or care attendants

Home care workers or care attendants can help with personal care, if the person with dementia is in agreement and has been assessed by social services as needing such help (see the Society's information sheet *Community care assessment*). The frequency of visits may range from several times a week to three or four times a day, depending on the person's needs and circumstances.

Personal care can include: supporting the person with getting up, washing, dressing and using the toilet; changing bedding and emptying commodes; doing laundry; helping the person to get ready for day care; supervising meals to ensure the person eats properly, and helping the person to go to bed at night.

Domestic help

Help with tasks such as shopping and housework can sometimes be arranged by social services if the person with dementia has been assessed as needing this kind of assistance. However, in many areas social services are no longer able to provide help with these kinds of tasks.

If domestic help is arranged privately, references must be checked and candidates interviewed personally to make sure that they are suitable and that they understand about dementia. Social services should be informed about the arrangement. It is important that even private services are co-ordinated with other services as part of the person's care plan.

In some areas, voluntary organisations may be able to provide help with shopping or cleaning. Social services can provide details of who to contact.

If the person with dementia's home has become unhygienic or the mess is out of control, social services may be able to arrange a one-off thorough cleaning.

Day care

The person with dementia may be able to attend a day care centre, arranged through social services, once a week or more frequently. Day care services can provide company and activities. They often also provide facilities such as chiropody, hairdressing and bathing. Transport to and from a day care service is usually arranged.

Some voluntary agencies may also run day care centres, clubs, drop-in centres or befriending schemes, where volunteers visit people in their own homes. These services vary from area to area. Check with social services.

Someone could also be employed privately, either to visit the person at home and keep them company or to accompany them out to places. Again, candidates should be interviewed carefully and references checked. The Society's information sheet *Short term care* may be helpful.

Health

Any illness can increase confusion. If possible and appropriate, the carer should accompany the person with dementia to GP or hospital appointments so that they can also talk to the doctor and check on any medication.

If the person uses a hearing aid, glasses or dentures, these should be regularly checked. The person should also have regular dental checkups, and if they are having problems walking they should have their feet checked. See the Society's advice sheet *Staying healthy*.

Medication

Some drugs can exacerbate confusion. A person with dementia should only take medication that their GP feels is absolutely necessary.

It can be difficult for some people with dementia to remember to take the right amount of medication at the right time. Dosset boxes, with separate compartments for the days of the week and times of day, are available from the pharmacist. Once the medication has been divided into these compartments, a phone call may be all that is needed to remind the person to take their

medication in the early stages. Later, a home carer or another professional who visits regularly may be able to check that the person takes their medication.

It may be necessary to remove unwanted medication and take it to the local pharmacy, so that the person with dementia does not take it by mistake.

A GP or pharmacist should be consulted before the person with dementia takes an over-the-counter remedy, such as aspirin or paracetamol.

Any concerns about the person's medication should be discussed with the GP or pharmacist.

Eating

As the person's dementia progresses, shopping and cooking for them may not be enough to ensure that they eat adequately. A care worker or relative may need to be with them to ensure that they eat at least one proper meal a day and drink enough fluid. Even if meals on wheels are provided, it may be necessary for someone to be there to make sure they are eaten.

It may be necessary to check that food is not being left to decay. Someone with dementia may not realise that decayed food is no longer edible.

Warmth

A person with dementia will often be more vulnerable to the cold. It is important to ensure that their home is adequately heated.

If the person forgets to switch on the heating, a heating system using a time switch and thermostat could be considered. Any fire or heater must have a guard.

For details about grants that are provided for insulation and heating costs, see the Society's information sheet *Adaptations, improvements and repairs to the home*.

Incontinence

As the person's dementia progresses, they may become incontinent. Incontinence can be caused by some treatable conditions, such as urinary tract infections or the side-effects of medication. It is, therefore, important that the GP is consulted in the first instance.

It may help if the toilet in the person's home is made easy to identify and to use. An occupational therapist can advise on aids such as handrails. Ensure that there are no obstacles, such as awkwardly-placed furniture, in the person's way and no doors that are hard to open.

The district nurse can give advice about incontinence products, such as pads, and strategies

to deal with incontinence. The nurse can also arrange for pads to be delivered to the home, if necessary, and can give details of any incontinence laundry service in the area. For more information, see the Society's advice sheet *Incontinence*.

Home safety

If a person with dementia is living alone, certain hazards will need to be considered. Although many such hazards can be minimised with thought and planning, a certain amount of risk may be unavoidable if the person with dementia is to retain their independence and enjoy a good quality of life. It is important to remember that the person with dementia has the same legal right to take risks and to make choices as anybody else.

It may help if ways of handling risks are discussed by the person with dementia, family members and any professionals involved. An agreement needs to be reached on what precautions should be taken and on what is considered to be an acceptable level of risk. For more information about safety see the Society's advice sheet *Safety in the home*.

Other arrangements for care will have to be made if the risks to the person with dementia or to other people become too great.

Adaptations and equipment

There are many different adaptations and kinds of equipment that may help the person with dementia to remain safely in their own home for longer. However, some people with dementia may find it hard to learn new skills or adapt to new ways of doing things. An occupational therapist can give advice on what may be helpful for the person at their stage of the illness. Recommendations may range from grab rails in the bathroom to specially adapted cutlery or non-spill cups. An occupational therapist can be contacted through the GP or social services.

A physiotherapist can give advice on mobility aids, such as walking frames or wheelchairs. Contact a physiotherapist through the GP.

For more information, see the Society's information sheets *Equipment to help with disability* and *Adaptations, improvements and repairs to the home*.

Security

Security can be a problem. The person may go out forgetting to close or lock doors and windows. If they have trouble recognising people, they may welcome strangers into their home. They may lock

themselves in their home and not answer the door if they become confused or afraid.

It may be helpful for a neighbour to have a spare set of keys and to keep an eye on the house and let a carer know if anything appears to be wrong.

A crime prevention officer from the local police can advise on suitable window and door locks, including doors that can be opened from the outside.

Safety tips:

- If the person 'wanders' away from their home and gets lost, they could wear an identity bracelet with a carer's or a helpful neighbour's phone number on it.
- Make sure the home is well lit and that there are no obvious hazards, such as loose carpet, trailing flexes or unsteady furniture.
- Items in daily use should be within easy reach, whereas dangerous substances, such as cleaning fluids, bleach or paint stripper, should be removed or locked safely away.
- Remove locks from the bathroom and toilet if the person could lock themselves in and remove any chains or bolts from the front door that would prevent a person entering in an emergency.
- Check that electrical wiring and appliances are safe. Ask for advice from a qualified electrician. Make sure it is not possible to take an electric heater into the bathroom.
- Gas appliances, such as boilers and water heaters, should be regularly serviced.
- If there are concerns about the person using gas or electrical appliances inappropriately, contact the gas or electricity company and ask for the person to be put on the priority service register. This means that they will be eligible for free regular safety checks and carers will be able to get advice on their behalf about safety measures, such as isolation valves.
- If it might be possible for the person to forget to turn off the taps and flood the home, consider a tap adaptation, such as one that only lets out a limited amount of water. It is also possible to have hot water temperature controls fitted. Check with a reputable firm of plumbers to find out what is available. Get several estimates.