



Personal care for people with dementia

Introduction	1
Difficulties	1
How you can help	2
Some hints on care	2
Hands and feet	2
Hair	2
Mouth	3
Dressing	3
Washing and bathing	3
Shaving	3
Getting help	3

Introduction

Personal care is important to all of us. It affects how we feel about ourselves and how other people react to us. Personal hygiene is also important in maintaining good health. The impact of dementia on a person's ability to care for him or herself will vary from one individual to another, and is also likely to change as the condition progresses.

Washing, dressing and other aspects of personal care involve individual preferences and established routines. They also involve using skills which people with dementia can find difficult.

Changes in motivation, mood, memory, understanding and behaviour can all affect a person's ability to attend to his or her personal care and appearance.

Difficulties

Difficulties which may be encountered include:

- A loss in personal appearance. This may take the form of inattention to cleanliness,

grooming or to appropriate state of dress. A previously tidy person may look unkempt and may seem unaware of the changes in his or her personal appearance.

- Wearing the same clothes day after day. The person may refuse to change clothing and respond with apparent irritation or anger if challenged about this.
- Forgetting to wash, shave, comb hair, brush teeth and so on, or performing certain activities repeatedly but neglecting others.
- Forgetting when care activities were last undertaken or mistakenly believing they have or have not been done.
- Losing skills needed to maintain personal care, such as co-ordinating movements, doing tasks in the right order and understanding the function of grooming aids and appliances.
- Showing less awareness of personal safety when using hot water, electrical appliances, razors and so on.
- Becoming confused over the order in which clothes should be put on.
- Difficulty with fastenings such as zips and buttons.
- Dressing or undressing at odd times or in inappropriate places.

- Misplacing items used for personal care or using them inappropriately.

How you can help

The very personal nature of these activities can make it difficult both to offer and to accept assistance. The person may not recognise that he or she needs assistance and react against being reminded, hurried or helped. The person may experience considerable frustration and anxiety when he or she has difficulties trying to carry out personal care tasks.

Supporting the person requires patience, understanding, tact, and a positive approach to maintain abilities and self-esteem.

Try to maintain the highest possible degree of independence, while being aware of the need to consider safety. Think about how much help is required. Consider ways in which you could encourage, prompt or make it easier for the person to carry out his or her personal care tasks. We all have our own way of going about things and it is helpful if the person's own routine can be kept to as much as possible.

The following suggestions may help:

- Allow time for activities such as washing and dressing. Make sure the room is warm and comfortable. Try to make things as relaxed as possible.
- Provide the maximum degree of privacy which safety will allow.
- Try giving prompts before assisting more actively, and provide the necessary prompts one step at a time. If assistance is required, give it tactfully and explain what you are doing.
- Avoid discussions and arguments and approach tasks positively.
- Provide a choice of clothing but perhaps limit this to avoid any stress which may be associated with decision-making.

- Lay items of clothing out in the order to be worn, preferably the same way the person would usually do it. Lay toiletries out in order of use.
- When the person is trying to do things, give encouragement. Give compliments and generally take an interest in the person's appearance.

The person's general level of co-operation with you regarding personal care tasks may fluctuate considerably. Remember it is pointless to argue. It is likely that in a short time the person with dementia will forget the dispute but you may be left tense, angry and exhausted. If certain areas prove difficult, try again later, try different approaches or choose a time of day when the person is relaxed and not too tired.

Some hints on care

Hands and feet

Trim nails when softened, either following a bath or after soaking feet or hands in a basin. Use round tipped scissors and cut toenails fairly straight. Providing a manicure can be a relaxing experience. Nails generally become harder with age and you should not trim them if they do not cut fairly easily.

People with circulatory problems, especially those with diabetes, have to take special care of their feet and regular chiropody may be essential. Comfortable, well-fitting shoes are important and preferable to slippers indoors.

Hair

It is best to keep to a routine familiar to the person, while providing as much assistance as necessary. If the person has been a regular visitor to the hairdressers, try to maintain this. Simple, easily cared-for styles are best. Perhaps you could arrange for a hairdresser to call at the person's home. Choose a comb or brush which is easy for the person to grasp.

Mouth

Mouth care is important to everyone's general health. A person with dementia may neglect cleaning teeth, and dentures can become ill fitting due to weight loss. Other problems include oral infections, inflammation and difficulties with chewing food.

You can help by giving prompts, one step at a time, throughout the process of cleaning teeth or dentures, to maintain independence as much as possible. If you have to provide care yourself, clean teeth or dentures thoroughly at least once a day. Regular check-ups are important and a home service is available.

Dressing

Choose clothing which is easy to wear and care for. Clothing can be made more manageable by replacing hooks, buttons and zips with Velcro fastenings. Dressing aids, such as long-handled shoehorns, elastic shoelaces, sock or stocking holders, may help to maintain independence and make it easier to help.

Take away clothes which need washing to avoid them being worn again. If the person requires complete assistance with dressing, dress him or her in stages, dressing just the top or bottom half of the body at one time. If a person has a weakness on one side, it is easiest to put clothing on this side first and remove it last.

Washing and bathing

When you help someone to bathe, check the

Having a fairly regular routine in relation to bathing can be helpful. Although bath oils and foams can make bathing more enjoyable, they must be used with extreme care as they can make the bath or shower tray very slippery. It may be best to use a favourite body oil or lotion after the bath.

When you supervise, prompt or assist someone with washing, be aware of the importance of carefully washing and drying skin folds. These areas are particularly vulnerable to soreness. Check for areas of redness, dryness, rashes or sores. If you use talcum powder at all, apply it very sparingly as it can be an irritant and cause inflammation, especially on moist skin.

Shaving

Changing over from the use of a blade razor to an electric shaver will be safer and can enable someone to shave independently for longer. It is probably best to encourage this change at an early stage, before it becomes essential.

Getting help

If you are worried about the personal care of someone with dementia, you can ask for help and advice from your community nurse, doctor or occupational therapist. You can call the freephone 24 hour **Dementia Helpline** on **0808 808 3000** for information and support at any time.

Barbara Sharp

Alzheimer Scotland

22 Drumsheugh Gardens, Edinburgh EH3 7RN

Telephone: 0131 243 1453

Fax: 0131 243 1450

Email: alzheimer@alzscot.org

Alzheimer Scotland - Action on Dementia is a company limited by guarantee and is recognised as a charity by the Inland Revenue. Registered in Scotland No. 149069. Scottish Charity No. SC022315.

Find us on the internet at
www.alzscot.org

