

## Christmas and New Year with Dementia

The festive season is something many of us look forward to, but it can also be a stressful time for many, with special meals to be prepared and guests to entertain. For people with dementia, and their partners and families, there can be extra challenges – established routines disrupted, dealing with unfamiliar environments and possibly managing without the full range of support services.

### How can you prepare for the festive season?

To make the holidays as stress free as possible it is important to plan ahead. This preparation should not just include practical details but also include emotional preparation.

It is important to be realistic about what is manageable both for the person with dementia and you. What adjustments are needed to make the holidays as stress-free as possible? Can you have a smaller scale celebration than normal? Can you ask family to help out more than you usually would? Don't be afraid to ask for help, particularly over the festive period when family are likely to be visiting.

It's a good idea to prepare visitors for any unusual behaviours they should expect, such as eating habits. Remind people that they may need to be asked to introduce themselves rather than assume that the person will remember them and not to be offended if they don't.

### Safety first

Whether you are caring for a person with dementia at home or having them to visit, you should, depending on how advanced their dementia is:

- remove trip hazards such as trailing cords or extension cables, clutter, rumpled rugs
- consider lighting levels. If the light is poor, there is a greater risk of falls and trips; people in later stages of dementia may also get confused and mistake shadows for strangers or some kind of threat
- lock away medicines and dangerous household chemicals
- avoid having poisonous plants or berries in the house such as holly or mistletoe berries
- exercise caution with electrical appliances
- fit a fireguard
- be careful about knives and other sharp objects.

### Overnight stays

If you are having someone with dementia to stay with you, or have adapted your own home for visitors, you should ensure that external doors are kept closed, maybe even locked. This ensures you don't need to worry about the person with dementia leaving the house alone while you're busy with guests.

If the person with dementia is in an unfamiliar environment you should leave a hall light on so that the bathroom can be found, and stairs are clearly visible. It can help to add signs to the doors to help people with dementia move around independently.

In the later stages of dementia, some people cannot recognise their own reflection, and thinking they see a stranger, become alarmed. Mirrors can be covered but you should check for other shiny surfaces and make sure that curtains are drawn shut before darkness outside and light inside make windows reflective.

### Food and drink

Food plays an important role in many people's festive celebrations. Find out if the person with dementia would rather eat by themselves, away from the main dining table, and what sort of appetite they have. Ask in advance what sort of food best suits the person with dementia; they might prefer finger food or light meals; they might like combinations of food which seem peculiar; they might prefer to eat out with normal mealtimes.

Sometimes, people with dementia find it hard to make out the food on their plate or are unable to see the plate on a table. Using a plate which contrasts with the colour of the food and a plate which contrasts with the table cloth - this will make it look more appealing and easier to see.

The person with dementia may enjoy a glass of wine with their meal or a celebratory whisky or sherry, but alcohol should be consumed in moderation. People with alcohol-related dementia should avoid alcohol altogether. Be aware that some people may be unable to drink alcohol because of medication they are taking or because they have a health condition which makes them more susceptible to the effects of alcohol.

People's balance tends to get worse as they get older, be aware that even a small

amount of alcohol may make people more unsteady on their feet and more likely to fall.

Check with the person's doctor if there are any foods which should be avoided or if there are any reasons why the person should not consume alcohol.

### Medication

You should make sure that the person with dementia has their prescription(s) and enough medication to cover the holiday period. Pharmacies are required to provide holiday cover - ask your local pharmacists in advance for the details. If you are not the person's usual carer, speak to the person's carer for details of their medication.

### Emotional needs

Inevitably, feelings are magnified when families come together over the holiday period. Just as the festive period may trigger happy memories, it may bring sadness at the thought of times past. Try to find positive things to focus on in the present and the future, rather than dwell on the past.

A person with dementia may feel guilt or sadness if they perceive themselves to be an additional burden; adult children may feel guilty that they should be doing more to help their parents. These kinds of feelings are best discussed openly rather than allowed to fester. Try to have an honest discussion and to understand each other's perspectives. There is no easy fix but problems discussed honestly and openly have more chance of being resolved.

### Closure of services

Many local authorities provide services throughout the festive period, although in some areas services may be reduced, or even withdrawn completely as workers take leave to spend time with their own families. It is important to find out in advance just where the gaps in service provision

will occur, especially if the person with dementia is heavily reliant upon them.

Try to prioritise the areas to cover and enlist as much assistance as possible. Explain to family and friends how much difference even a little help can make, and break tasks down into realistic goals so that they are less overwhelming.

### Emergencies

All local authorities have an emergency social work service – ask the Dementia Helpline (0808 808 3000) for the number for your area. You should also ensure that you have a number for the person with dementia's GP and that you know where the nearest accident and emergency unit is. NHS 24 operates a 24-hour nurse advice and health information service providing confidential information for the general public, and further details of out-of-hours medical services in your area. The telephone number is 111.

If you think anyone's life is in danger and you need an emergency ambulance, phone 999.

### People in care homes

Partners and families often feel guilty that a loved one is being cared for away from home, this can be heightened further over the festive period.

You may be thinking about bringing the person home for the holidays. For some people with dementia, a change of environment can be very stressful and can cause confusion or anxiety. If you do decide to bring the person with dementia home you might want to have a test visit shortly before the holiday to see how things work out.

If the person you care for can't come home, you can still make plans to share part of the celebrations with him or her. Ask the care home staff what they will be doing to help residents celebrate and if you can do anything to help. You might want to take along some home cooking or a special treat that you know the person will particularly enjoy. You may be able to spend a large part of the day visiting the care home but you should try to ensure that the person with dementia isn't overwhelmed.



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Alzheimer Scotland – Action on Dementia is a company limited by guarantee, registered in Scotland 149069. Registered office: 22 Drumsheugh Gardens, Edinburgh EH3 7RN. It is recognised as a charity by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator, no. SC022315