

## Making your home dementia friendly

Dementia is a condition associated with the progressive loss of the powers of the brain.

Every person who receives a diagnosis of dementia will experience it differently depending on what areas of the brain have been affected. In general, the condition is characterised by a range of issues, including memory loss, deteriorated mobility, poorer sight, and increased confusion. Together, these can impact a person's ability to carry out day-to-day tasks at home.

There are several steps we can take to support someone to live safely, well and as independently as possible with dementia. Simple changes to your home can make it easier to manage and depending on your situation, your local Health and Social Care Partnership may have a duty to provide you with aids and adaptations. An occupational therapist, who can be contacted through your local Health and Social Care Partnership, Community Mental Health Team or Post Diagnostic Support Link Worker, can advise on what would be most helpful, based on your needs, wishes and general circumstances.

### Lighting

As we age, our eyesight naturally deteriorates, often needing twice the level of light to see clearly. To maximise its potential, we should create the best possible environment by making sure the lighting levels are right. When we look at something, our eyes take in the information which is then interpreted by our brain. If the lighting is patchy and there are dark corners, our brains must make sense of limited information.

People who are living with dementia often have co-existing conditions, which can include sight problems. Changes to the brain caused by dementia itself can also impact sight, and for some people, it can become increasingly compromised as the condition progresses. Dementia can also impact perception, meaning shadows can be mistaken for another person, a mark on the ground, or even a mouse or a spider. By lighting the room evenly, including dark corners, the risk of possible confusion can be greatly reduced. Uplighters or spotlights are especially useful for this.

When considering appropriate lighting, think about what the room is used for. If it's where people eat, light levels should be brighter than a room used for relaxation or sleep. You could try using daylight balanced bulbs (6000 Kelvins or above) in kitchens or bathrooms, and warm white bulbs (under 3300 Kelvins) in bedrooms.

Because older eyes take longer to adjust to changes in light levels, moving from a well-lit room to a dimly lit or unlit room can sometimes cause difficulty. Although we have all become accustomed to turning lights off when we leave a room for energy saving or environmental reasons, it can be helpful for people with dementia to leave the lights on in these areas.

However, there are other environmentally friendly options. Rechargeable LED motion sensor cabinet lights are available that illuminate when they detect movement and turn off automatically. These can be helpful when attached to walls or skirtings, to provide lighting to corridors or even under bedside tables to illuminate the area if someone gets up during the night. They're also a useful wayfinding tool, for example, by adding multiple lights to illuminate a path from a bedroom to the bathroom. Or if locating the toilet bowl is an issue at night, motion activated toilet bowl lights are available from various outlets, such as Amazon. These might also be handy to help with orientation if you go on holiday.

Smart lights that can be set to come on automatically and can be adjusted to offer different levels of light may help some people to sleep better. Lighting that is bright in the morning, reducing in intensity throughout the day to mirror the natural changes in daylight, is thought to help maintain circadian rhythms. This is particularly important for people who spend a lot of time indoors and have a limited exposure to natural light. Find out more about smart lights here: <https://www.alzscot.org/philips-hue-smart-lighting>

Glare can also cause difficulties – try to avoid this where possible by fitting light shades that cover the whole bulb and adding blinds to windows. If you are refurbishing, opt for matt wall finishes and avoid shiny floors, worktops and high gloss woodwork to minimise the potential for glare.

## Colour

Our colour vision declines as we age, and over time, our eyes become less sensitive to cooler colours like blues and greens. Our sensitivity to bright colours like reds and oranges is usually retained for longer.

Using contrasting colours can be helpful to draw attention to things we want people to see. For example, using bright red table mats and contrasting plates can help people see their meal more clearly. Or, if the colours of your chairs, furnishings and floor are similar, it can be helpful to add a contrasting seat cover to help people sit down confidently. This can also be helpful in the bathroom with the use of brighter or contrasting toilet seats.

## Wayfinding and Signage

People who are living with dementia may experience difficulties with orientation and way finding. This may be in new and unfamiliar places, or it might be in their own home of many years. Helping someone who experiences these issues to navigate their own home, for example to find their kitchen or bathroom, can be a challenge. Finding supplies to make a drink or a snack can be difficult too. To help minimise any confusion, consider where and how items are stored and how accessible they are to the person. Items kept in clear glass jars are more visible but consider whether it's easy enough to open the lid. Sometimes items left out uncovered is easiest.

Reading and writing can also be affected by dementia so if making signs, it is a good idea to add a picture. A clear simple photograph is ideal or good clip art – but avoid stick men or anything that looks abstract. Routine is important and establishing routines early on is best, particularly when organising and labelling areas. If you leave this too late, there's a chance it might be ineffective. Try labelling kitchen units with a photograph of typical content, for example a pan, a tin, a packet of breakfast cereal, or the person's usual cup; bedroom drawer units with an image of their contents, such as a jumper, pyjamas or a pair of socks; and the fridge with an image of a milk carton.

Transparent glass doors are extremely helpful as anyone can see inside the cupboard or into the next room, which helps with wayfinding. If you have any glass fronted kitchen units, you may wish to use these to store items the person with dementia uses regularly. It might also be helpful to leave out some items, for example a few tea bags on a saucer, a cup and spoon, and biscuits. Transparent glass kettles are also available which can help people check the water level before switching on.

As dementia progresses, many people rely increasingly on visual clues, so clutter can become confusing and distracting. It is helpful to only leave out items the person needs. For example, leaving out toothpaste, shaving cream and face cream can be confusing. Instead, just leave out the item needed for the immediate task. If you have multiple remote controls for TV and set top boxes, consider swapping for a universal control that covers all devices and is simple to use. There are many models available, such as the Flipper, which has large and clear buttons. At dinner, try putting out the cutlery for each course at a time. Sharing plates of biscuits and snacks can lead to overeating so individual portions are simpler and easier to manage.

## Background noise

Dementia can make it harder for people to understand what is being said and to find the right words. Processing what has been said and formulating a response may take longer than it used to – it is important that people are given time, patience and space to communicate well. Dementia can make it harder to filter out background noise and focus on the person speaking so, as the condition progresses, people may rely more and more on body language and tone than words. Constant background noise can be overstimulating and cause people to feel agitated or withdrawn. It can be very distracting and make it harder for people to concentrate, for example people may need more support if eating in busy or noisy places like cafes. It can help to avoid crowded places and limit the number of visitors the person sees at one time – but also asking people to speak one at a time and turning off TVs and radios when not in use can be beneficial.

It's also important to remember that certain areas of the home are typically noisier than others. Bathrooms, kitchens, and conservatories usually have hard surfaces that cause sound to be amplified. Bedrooms and living areas tend to have softer fabrics which cushions the sound. Adding window or shower curtains and textiles to bathrooms and kitchens may help.

### Flooring

It can help if floor coverings are the same colour or tone in all rooms – and preferably plain. If possible, door bars should also be of the same colour. For some people, a change in floor colour or a door bar can be confusing because they may feel unsure if it signals a change in level. This can cause them to hesitate or edge their toes forward, feeling their way. Where there is a change in level, for example steps to the front door, it can be helpful to mark the edges with contrasting colour.

Patterned flooring can also cause confusion. Blocks of colour can appear like uneven flooring, or patterns can resemble fallen objects which people may try to pick up. Shiny floors can look wet so people might avoid them, and rugs can be a trip hazard, particularly for people who are unsteady when walking.

### Mirrors

As dementia progresses, people may no longer recognise their own reflection in a mirror. They may mistake their reflection for an old friend or family member, or they may feel threatened by the presence of someone they don't recognise. This may cause them to become distressed. If this is an issue, the best solution is to remove or cover any mirrors.

Similar issues can be caused by reflections on glass so it's a good idea to make sure curtains are closed at night, especially if the person is worried about intruders in the home. Be vigilant about reflections in furniture, picture glass or chrome detailing in case it triggers a similar reaction. These items can be covered or removed as necessary.

### Memory aids, community alarms and technology

There is a wide range of products on the market that have been developed to make life a bit easier for people who have dementia, their family and carers. Alzheimer Scotland has a dedicated website, called 'Meet Adam' (About Digital and Me), which has a range of tried and tested products to explore and can be accessed here: <https://meetadam.org/>

Below are some examples that may help with daily living:

- **Dementia clocks** display the time, day, and date in a clear and easy to read way. There are also more advanced dementia clocks available that can be programmed to display written prompts at set times, for example time to take medication, meals, or drinks. It's helpful to position the clock near to where a person with dementia usually sits so they can see it easily.
- **Timers** can be useful for someone living with the earlier stages of dementia. They can help with general reminders, such as when to take medication, cooking times, or when to take washing out of the machine. Again, it is helpful to establish a routine early on and choosing the most suitable device is important. People who live with dementia are sometimes unable to manage smart phones and complex equipment, so finding something that works for them and is simple to use is key.
- **Photo button phones** make it simple for people with dementia to make phone calls, as they only need to press the picture of the person they wish to speak to (on landlines. For mobiles, this is followed by the green call button). 'OwnFone' produce mobile phones that can be personalised with photo buttons – find out more here: <https://ownfone.com/>

- **White boards, diaries, or calendars** are good memory aids (remember to remove any completed tasks and reminders to avoid confusion).
- **Amazon Alexa Show** enables family to make video calls without the person needing to press any buttons. Outgoing calls can also be made by voice command. These are useful for people who are in the early stages of dementia to call for help should they fall or feel unwell. Other electronic devices can also be linked, including table lights, which can be useful for those who struggle to bend or have issues with balance. These devices can also stream music, for example Music 4 dementia, which can be a helpful reminiscence tool. For more information, visit <https://m4dradio.com/>
- **Automated medicine dispensers** are mostly lockable and can be programmed to prompt people to take the right dosage of medication at the right time. This reduces the risk of accidental overdose. Some dispensers beep or flash at the time medication is due, which continues until the machine has been turned off (up to 30 minutes).
- **Community alarms** are available through your local Health and Social Care partnership for an annual fee. They offer a pendant or wrist band call button to press in case of emergency inside the home and a few feet beyond. This makes it easy for a person with dementia to call for help if they fall, feel unwell or need help.
- **Telecare services** are passive technologies that are triggered by sensors – a person with dementia does not have to activate them or respond to them. Generally once triggered, an alert is sent to a call centre who arrange a response, often this is by calling named keyholders and asking them to attend the person's house.

If the alert is for smoke, heat, or gas, they will arrange emergency responders. Products include door monitors that can be activated on a set timeframe (usually evening and night) so that an alert is sent to a call centre when the door is opened, and extreme temperature sensors that can detect if a house is too hot, which could suggest a fire, or too cold, which could point to heating failure. Traditional smoke and heat detectors can also be connected to this system along with activity monitors that are designed to track movement and can pick up if a person is moving around a lot during the night or is not moving which may mean they have fallen.

For people who get up during the night and may need assistance to return to bed, sensor mats are available which are activated when the person stands on them. These can be connected to alarms or lights for carers. If you are a carer, a gentler way to be woken is a small vibrating alarm which can be put under a pillow. This means you can sleep soundly knowing you will be alerted if you are needed. These mats can also be used for people who are less mobile, so carers can attend to other tasks and be alerted when required. Contact your local Health and Social Care Partnership for details.

## Safety at home

- **Home Safety Check** – Some Health and Social Care partnerships offer a Home Safety check. This looks at key safety issues in the house, including trailing or frayed cables, overloaded sockets, lighting, accumulation of products that could present a fire risk, heat, CO2 and smoke sensors, and trip hazards like rugs and clutter

- **Handrails** – Fitting handrails on both sides of stairs can help reduce falls, as can rails to external steps. Ask your Health and Social Care Partnership for an Occupational Therapy assessment to identify products that may help reduce risks including grab rails and bathing aids
- **Heating** – Sometimes people who are living with dementia will incorrectly adjust thermostats/ heating controls or take the plugs out of portable heaters. Lockable socket covers are available which may reduce this risk. People living with dementia may also need support to arrange regular boiler servicing, adjusting timer controls as the seasons change, and when the clocks change. It's also a good idea to check the hot water thermostat to reduce the risk of scalds
- **Flood risks** – People with dementia can experience changes in their ability to concentrate, which can lead to oversights such as leaving taps on. If this is likely to present a flood risk, alternative plugs called 'magi plugs' allow water to drain away automatically when the basin is over filled with water. Find out more here: <https://www.magiplug.com/>
- **Cooker safety** – Stove Guards have built-in heat and smoke sensors which cut off power when triggered. They must be fitted by a qualified electrician, as do isolator switches which can disconnect electric cookers but allow others to switch it on and use it. Gas cookers and gas fires can have isolation switches fitted free by SGN. For more information, call SGN's Careline on 0800 975 1818
- **Key safes** – These can be useful to enable access to a person's home when the owner is less mobile. Try to mount these out of sight and replace if the faces of the numbers become worn. Speak to your local Health and Social Care Partnership for more information.
- **Nuisance calls** – Call blockers protect people from scam calls by barring all calls other than ones you have selected. The free-to-use Telephone Preference Service (0345 070 0707) should stop marketing calls to both landlines and mobiles. More information on how to register for this can be found on the Citizens Advice Bureau website at: [www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/phone-internet-downloads-or-tv/stop-getting-nuisance-calls-and-texts/](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/phone-internet-downloads-or-tv/stop-getting-nuisance-calls-and-texts/)
- **Cameras** – Indoor security cameras provide a live stream to your smart phone. Some also send alerts to your phone in the event of a loud noise, which could signal a fall or cry for help. Visit Alzheimer Scotland's technology site at <https://meetadam.org/> for more information on a camera with two-way audio which allows two parties to speak. These are useful for people who live alone and require a level of supervision, perhaps because they are at a higher risk of falling. Depending on where these cameras are positioned, it may also be possible to check if any food or medicines left out for the person have been taken. Some people will choose to add cameras to main living areas, kitchen, hall, and stairs. It is important to make sure the person is agreeable to this level of supervision, and that you avoid private areas of the home including bathrooms and bedrooms.