



THE ALZHEIMER
SOCIETY *of* IRELAND



Assisting with Personal Care

Washing • Dressing • Toileting • Personal Grooming



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For further information including copies of publications contact the Alzheimer National Helpline

Open 6 days a week:

Monday to Friday 10am to 5pm

Saturday 10am to 4pm



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Assisting with Personal Care

As a person's dementia progresses, they may need more help with everyday activities such as washing, bathing, and dressing. You can help a person with dementia to wash and dress in a way that respects their preferences and their dignity. This booklet is written for carers. It offers tips to help with washing, dressing and toileting and grooming.



Everyone's dementia journey is different and not all situations arise for everyone, therefore these tips are not guidance or instructions- they are a collection of actions and approaches which other caregivers have found useful. You may, or may not, think the ideas are worth trying in your situation.

The tips are presented under the following headings:

1. Washing

3. Toileting

2. Dressing / Undressing

4. Personal Grooming

Overriding Principles for Care

Several general principles or good 'rules of thumb' for care were identified and this section has been created at the beginning of the booklet to prevent the need to repeat them all the way through.

If possible, promote independence and try to involve the person

- 👁️ Monitor the person when conducting their own personal care - If the person is struggling, offer to help. You may need to help the person more when they are tired.
- 👁️ Position yourself so you are comfortable to carry out the care activity and not intimidating to the person.
- 👁️ Communication is key. Connect with the person, move physically down to the person's level, speak to the person clearly, build trust and encourage.
- 👁️ Explain what you are doing / talk to the person through the care activity.
- 👁️ Make sure you have time for the care activity or try to complete the care activity at a different time to suit you and the person you are supporting.
- 👁️ Provide reassurance to the person throughout, let them know they are okay and doing the right thing.
- 👁️ Demonstrating the activity may be useful. Soft calming music may be helpful in the background.
- 👁️ Routinely checking skin integrity for any changes is recommended and contact your GP/Local public health nurse with any concerns.

If care is difficult

- 🕒 Try to address any unmet needs such as pain, hunger or thirst.
- 🕒 Is the person well?
- 🕒 Can you adapt your approach?
- 🕒 Think about timing, could you try at a different time of day?
- 🕒 Acknowledge that approaches or strategies may not work all of the time. What is difficult now may not be in a month's time.
- 🕒 You may not be able to complete all care activities if the person is not keen.
- 🕒 If the person requires full assistance with personal care, it is essential that you contact the public health nurse to discuss this.

Is the care activity essential? If not, could the person have a dressing gown day or another mode of care such as dry shampoo rather than a hair wash?





Washing

1.

General points

- Choose the best time of day for the person for bathing i.e. when they are most relaxed and try to be consistent with their usual bathing routine.
- The way you ask may be important, Use encouragement or communication strategies to support the person to understand and agree to a bath or shower.
- Consider the type of bathing the person is used to such as shower, bath, sponge bath.
- Try to get everything ready before starting and make sure the room is warm.
- Promote independence as much as possible by involving the person. You may have to prompt the person and explain the next step and supervise them throughout the activity.
- Lay out items that are required for the task for example soap, washcloth, towel in the order they will be required and use products/ product packaging that is familiar to the person if possible.
- Place items within easy reach to accommodate reduced mobility.

- 🕒 It can be helpful to use brightly coloured soap, towels etc., to provide visual contrast.
- 🕒 A laminate sign/or picture may be beneficial to promote task orientation if needed.
- 🕒 Check the water temperature with a thermometer or your elbow (a sensitive area) before using.
- 🕒 Allow the person to feel the water before bathing or showering if it provides reassurance to them.

Showering / Bathing

- 🕒 Offer as much privacy as is possible
- 🕒 For easy dispensing, you could use wall dispensers for shower gel or shampoo.

Body / Strip Wash

- 🕒 Choose a suitable place to wash, maybe by the sink or seated nearby.
- 🕒 You may want to protect the floor from the water. Remember a towel may move if a person stands on it - consider a non-slip mat
- 🕒 Keep the person wrapped up and as warm as possible. Use towels to cover the person to maintain their dignity. Try not to undress the person completely, wash one area at a time (for example, top then bottom of body).
- 🕒 Wash where it seems appropriate first depending on the situation or how the person is on the day. From top to bottom is a good place to start and from front to back in the groin and bottom area to reduce the chance of infections.
- 🕒 When exiting the shower/ bath - the person may benefit from sitting on a chair bathing and while drying self, it is best to put a towel on the chair.
- 🕒 If the person is standing, make sure there is something for the person to hold onto so they can steady themselves during this activity.

- You may find it easiest to assist with washing the person while they are sitting down.
- Dry thoroughly and check skin, especially in creases such as under the person's breasts or folds under the stomach.

Refusing to get washed

- Sometimes the person will refuse to get washed. This can be for a few hours or it can be for weeks. It is important not to get annoyed or frustrated.
- Is there any other reason why they are refusing such as, pain, issues with their vision, boredom, discomfort. These may need to be addressed before they will allow you to help them get washed.
- If they refuse in the morning, come back in the evening as they may associate a bath with going to bed, or they may associate a bath with a certain day of the week.
- They may not feel comfortable in a shower, as they may only be able to remember getting a wash at the sink.
- Consider other external supports such as home care hours.

Optimising safety in the bathroom

- Position yourself somewhere comfortable, so you do not injure yourself if providing assistance.
- Assist the person to keep safe when getting in and out. If it is unsafe or too difficult to assist the person in or out of the bath or shower, offer a strip wash.
- Obtain and use appropriate equipment such as a bath or shower chair or grab rails. An occupational therapist (OT) could assess your situation and help you access the correct equipment.
- Safe storage of medications, chemicals, hairdryers, electric razors.
- There is no need to bath/shower the person every day unless they prefer it or need it for clear hygiene reasons.



Dressing / Undressing

2.

- Consider where the person has always completed this activity and try to continue with the person's typical routine. The person may prefer to put on all their underwear first or completely dress their top and then their bottom half.
- If possible, assist the person with their preferences and the clothes they have always liked.
- Ensure seasonally appropriate clothing is accessible in a decluttered wardrobe and encourage the person to be involved in choice of outfit. Try to not offer too much choice if this disrupts the person's focus.
- Encourage the person to be involved in dressing or undressing. Perhaps start the activity off for the person such as doing up the top button. By allowing time the person may go on to complete the rest of the task independently.

- If assistance is required, get clothes out ready for the person. Put clothes in a familiar place, leave clothes the right way around and in the order that they will be put on.
- Time care activities carefully to the person's individual routine. When is the best time to assist someone to get ready for bed? It may be slightly earlier than bedtime when the person still has some energy and is not too tired.
- Keep the person warm throughout. Perhaps warm your hands before helping the person. Place a towel on their lap to maintain their dignity, always try to keep something covering the person as this can build trust.
- Give instructions in very short steps, if the person is more confused, for example, 'Now put your arm through the sleeve'.
- If the person has one arm that is more flexible than the other, dress the least flexible arm first.
- Be mindful to conserve your own and the energy of your loved one.
- If the person has difficulties with understanding or mobility you could minimise the amount of standing up or sitting down they do. For example, you could assist with all of the top half dressing first and then move to the lower half. Some people have found putting a skirt on over the person's head to be easier.
- If dressing is difficult, you could buy simple clothes such as loose t-shirts, V-necks, tracksuit bottoms, stretchy clothes, or cardigans rather than jumpers.

If the person has dressed themselves, try to overlook small dressing discrepancies if addressing them will upset the person.

Don't forget the important personal touches such as beads, a brooch, tissue, glasses or hearing aids. If someone struggles with small clasps; alternatives such as magnetic or elasticated jewellery may support them to continue to dress to their preference.

What a person with dementia wears may help them understand where they are and what they are doing.

- 👁 Make sure that clothing is suited to the environment / task i.e for work, relaxation, gardening. Similarly, wearing nightwear may make the person think that it is time for bed.
- 👁 It is good to change into day-wear even if they are not going out or having visitors, to maintain a sense of routine.
- 👁 Remember that the person may no longer be able to tell you if they are too hot or cold, or if clothing doesn't fit correctly, so watch for signs of discomfort.
- 👁 If mistakes are made – for example, by putting something on the wrong way round – be tactful. Try to find a way for you both to laugh about it.
- 👁 Compliment them on the way they look and encourage them to take pride in their appearance.

If dressing is difficult, consider the person having a dressing gown day

Not wanting to change clothes

Sometimes people with dementia are reluctant to undress, even when they go to bed, or will refuse to change their clothes.

It's important to make sure the person changes their underwear every day and the rest of their clothes regularly, and to find ways to do this without upsetting them. Here are a few ways you could help someone:

- Remove dirty clothing and put clean clothing in its place when the person is in the bath or shower, or when they go to bed.
- Encourage them to change for certain occasions, for example because someone is coming to visit, or they are due to go to a formal group event.
- Tell them how much you'd love to see them wearing something new.
- If they want to wear the same outfit, you could buy multiples of the same items.
- It can sometimes be better to accept unusual clothing than have a confrontation. If someone is determined to wear a hat in bed or heavy coat in summer, try where possible to respect their choice.
- Post steps for dressing on a large whiteboard in the bedroom. If reading is difficult use pictures or drawings.





Toileting

3.

- If the person stands up, they may need the toilet. Other signs or cues may include restlessness or anxious behaviour and / or observing the person tugging at clothing. You may need to show or remind the person where the toilet is.
- If possible and appropriate, prompt toilet use regularly including during the evening and/or night and before bed.
- Place visual cues to help the person know where to use the toilet. Visual cues should be simple and straightforward such as a photograph or picture of a toilet and place this in a prominent position.
- Remove any non-essential objects from around the toilet or commode, including wash cloths and reading materials, these may confuse the person about the intended purpose of the toilet
- Use of a coloured toilet seat can draw attention to the toilet. In some circumstances removing the toilet seat lid completely may be preferable.

- Make sure the toilet roll is in the person's line of vision and within easy reach when sitting on toilet.
- Supervise toilet use if needed. Talk the person through the process.
- It may help to prepare toilet roll for the person and take the rest away.
- Allow the person privacy while on the toilet. You could leave the person on the toilet for a little while to make sure they have finished.
- If required, assist with wiping the person's bottom. Get in a position where you can clean the person properly. Clean in a motion from front to back and not the other way around, as you could cause an infection. Make sure the person's bottom is clean. Wash the person's bottom if needed. If the person is likely to get sore do not use soap or scented soap, there are other products to use such as washing creams/ moistened toilet tissues can be considered. Offer a shower or bath if the person requires.
- Support with re-dressing if required. Assist/prompt the person to wash their hands.
- If the person has any issues with incontinence please link with your public health nurse.
- Try to offer as much reassurance as possible to the person, this can help reduce any feelings of embarrassment or dislike that a person may feel.
- Males may find it easier to sit on the toilet rather than stand if they are unsteady. They could use a urinal bottle.
- If an accident does happen, try not to make a big deal of it. Give them lots of reassurance, talk them through what you are doing and change the subject.

Try to offer as much reassurance as possible to the person, this can help reduce any feelings of embarrassment or dislike that a person may feel.

When going out: plan ahead

- It may be a good idea to go somewhere you know where the toilets are.
- If the person is using the toilet in an unfamiliar environment be aware that they may become disoriented on their return and supervision may be beneficial.
- If you are in a café or restaurant and you leave the table to accompany the person to the toilet, let the staff know so they do not assume you have finished your meal/drink.
- It may be helpful to obtain a RADAR key, a universal key for many disabled toilets in (Europe). For further information please see the Irish Wheelchair Association website www.iwa.ie
- You could take a urinal bottle for males to use.
- If appropriate, take spare pads/clothes/urinal bottle out with you.





Personal Grooming

4.

Shaving

Consider an electric razor as these can be easier and safer to use independently. Perhaps let the person start and if required you can support them to finish.

- 🕒 Learn what you can from the person about their preferences/how they shave.
- 🕒 Be gentle and try to be precise. Shave slowly if the person grows very coarse hair.
- 🕒 Shave the person in a place/position where it is comfortable for you both.
- 🕒 Talk to the person and explain what you are doing.
- 🕒 It may help to shave the person before they are dressed if this is their usual routine or preference.
- 🕒 You can consider using a professional barber to assist with shaving the person if this formed part of their usual routine.
- 🕒 Shaving after shower or bath can be easier as the hair will be softer and easier to shave.

Oral Hygiene

- 🕒 Prompt the person to clean their teeth.
- 🕒 You could get items ready, such as lay the brush out and take the top off the toothpaste or leave toothpaste on the brush ready to use, so you know whether the person's teeth have been cleaned.
- 🕒 Some people find it helpful to only leave the person's toothbrush out and remove other brushes from the sink.
- 🕒 If the person is finding a standard toothbrush difficult to use, consider discussing the use of an electric toothbrush with your dentist.
- 🕒 It may help if you clean your teeth at the same time as the person?
- 🕒 If the person is not at the sink, you could give them a brush with toothpaste, then have one empty cup and a cup with water in. You could try different types or flavours of toothpaste.
- 🕒 Try to prevent the person from cleaning teeth for too long, so their gums do not get irritated.
- 🕒 Has the person been seen by a dentist or hygienist recently? Consider booking an appointment. Some dentists do home visits.

Please ensure to follow recommended guidelines from your dentist regarding denture care.

Washing hair in the bath or shower

- Remember to protect the person's eyes – you could use a facecloth or your hand. Rinse off carefully.
- If appropriate, you could lean the person's head back when in bath or shower.
- Consider washing the person's hair last so they do not get cold.
- Consider switching the shower off while shampooing because the noise from the shower can be disturbing for them.

Washing hair separately to a bath or shower

- Remove hearing aids before washing hair.
- Wash the hair at a place that is manageable for you. Position yourself well so you can reach. E.g. the kitchen sink. You can use a jug to rinse
- Put a towel around the person's shoulders.
- Have a dry towel nearby in case you get water or suds in their eyes.
- A shower cone attachment can be useful if bending is a problem.
- Wash the scalp if the person is bald.
- Baby shampoo is soft and mild on the eyes so can be a nice shampoo to use.

Managing hair

- Consider a low maintenance hair style.
- Talk to the person about their previous hair styles and hair experiences.
- Brushing and stroking hair can be a good way to calm a person when they are upset, afraid or frustrated. Let them do it, if they are able.

For more information

Useful publications

Safety in the home

Living well day to day - respect, support and value the person living with dementia

Communication

Carers looking after yourself

Moving and Handling

Promoting continence

Pressure care advice



**I have dementia...
First steps after
diagnosis**



**I have dementia...
How do I plan
for the future**



**Practical tips for
living well with
dementia**



**Driving and
dementia**

You can order free copies by calling **1800 341 341**
or emailing **helpline@alzheimer.ie**

Disclaimer

The Alzheimer Society of Ireland has taken great care to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this booklet. We are not liable for any inaccuracies, errors, omissions or misleading information. The photographs featured in this booklet are models.

Useful contacts

The Alzheimer Society of Ireland

Freefone Helpline: 1800 341 341

Email: helpline@alzheimer.ie

Website: www.alzheimer.ie

HSE - The Health Service Executive

To find out where your local HSE Health Centre is or to ask about services that may be available in your area including occupational therapy and physiotherapy;

Call: 1800 700 700

Citizens Information Service

LoCall: 0761 074000

Website: www.citizensinformation.ie

Association of Occupational Therapists Ireland (AOTI)

Website: www.aoti.ie

Phone: (01) 874 8136



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National Helpline: 1800 341 341

Email: helpline@alzheimer.ie

Website: www.alzheimer.ie