

Your Care Instructions

Dementia is a loss of mental skills that affects daily life. It is different from mild memory loss that occurs with aging. Dementia can cause problems with memory, thinking clearly and planning. It is different for everyone, but it usually gets worse slowly. Some people who have dementia can function well for a long time. But at some point, it may become hard for the person to care for themselves.

It can be upsetting to learn that a loved one has this condition. You may be afraid and worried about what will happen. You may wonder how you will care for the person. There is no cure for dementia, but medicine may be able to slow memory loss and improve thinking for a while. Other medicines may help with sleep, depression and behavior changes.

In some cases, people can function well for a long time. You can help your loved one by making their home life easier and safer. You also need to take care of yourself. Caregiving can be stressful, but support is available to help you and give you a break when you need it.

Alzheimer Society of Canada offers good information and support. If you are caring for someone with dementia, you can help make their life safer and more comfortable. You can also help your loved one make decisions about future care. You may also want to bring up legal and financial issues. These are hard but important conversations to have.

Follow-up care is a key part of your loved one's treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor or nurse call line if your loved one is having problems. It's also a good idea to know your loved one's test results and keep a list of the medicines they take.

How can you care for your loved one at home?

Taking care of the person

- If the person takes medicine for dementia, help them take it exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor or nurse call line if you notice any problems with the medicine.
- Make a list of the person's medicines. Review it with all of their doctors.
- Help the person eat a balanced diet. Serve plenty of whole grains, fruits and vegetables every day. If the person is not hungry at mealtimes, give snacks at midmorning and in the afternoon. Offer drinks such as Boost or Ensure if the person is losing weight.

- Encourage exercise. Walking and other activities may slow the decline of mental ability. Help the person stay active mentally with reading, crossword puzzles, or other hobbies.
- Talk openly with the doctor about any behaviour changes. Many people who have dementia become easily upset, agitated or worried. There are many things that can cause this, such as medicine side effects, confusion and pain. It may be helpful to:
 - Ensure basic needs are being met. These can include feelings of hunger or thirst, a need to use the toilet, or feeling too hot or too cold. It's also important to ensure that pain is being managed appropriately.
 - Keep distractions to a minimum. It may also help to keep noise levels low and voices quiet.
 - Develop simple daily routines for bathing, dressing, and other activities. And remind your loved one often about upcoming changes to the daily routine, such as trips or appointments.
 - Ask what is upsetting them. Keep in mind that people who have dementia don't always know why they are upset.
- Take steps to help if the person is sundowning. This is the restless behaviour and trouble with sleeping that may occur in late afternoon and at night. Try not to let the person nap during the day. Offer a glass of warm milk or caffeine-free tea before bedtime.
- Be patient. A task may take the person longer than it used to.
- For as long as they are able, allow your loved one to make decisions about activities, food, clothing, and other choices. Let them be independent, even if tasks take more time or are not done perfectly. Tailor tasks to the person's abilities. For example, if cooking is no longer safe, ask for other help. Your loved one can help set the table, or make simple dishes such as a salad. When the person needs help, offer it gently.

Staying safe

- Make your home (or your loved one's home) safe. Tack down rugs, and put no-slip tape in the tub. Install handrails, and put safety switches on stoves and appliances. Keep rooms free of clutter. Make sure walkways around furniture are clear. Do not move furniture around, because the person may become confused.
- Use locks on doors and cupboards. Lock up knives, scissors, medicines, cleaning supplies, and other dangerous things.
- Do not let the person drive or cook if they can't do it safely. A person with dementia should not drive unless they are able to pass an on-road driving test. Your provincial ministry of transportation can do a driving test if there is any question.
- Get medical alert jewelry for the person so that you can be contacted if they wander away. If possible, provide a safe place for wandering, such as an enclosed yard or garden.

Taking care of yourself

- Ask your doctor about support groups and other resources in your area.
- Take care of your health. Be sure to eat healthy foods and get enough rest and exercise.
- Take time for yourself. Respite services provide someone to stay with the person for a short time while you get out of the house for a few hours.
- Make time for an activity that you enjoy. Read, listen to music, paint, do crafts, or play an instrument, even if it's only for a few minutes a day.
- Spend time with family, friends and others in your support system.

When should you call for help?

Call 911 anytime you think the person may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- The person who has dementia wanders away and you can't find them.
- The person who has dementia is seriously injured.

Call your doctor or nurse call line now or seek immediate medical care if:

- The person suddenly sees things that are not there (hallucinates).
- The person has a sudden change in their behaviour.

Watch closely for changes in the person's health, and be sure to contact the doctor if:

- The person has symptoms that could cause injury.
- The person has problems with his or her medicine.
- You need more information to care for a person with dementia.
- You need respite care so you can take a break.

For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information call Health Link at 811.

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