

Health, wellbeing and lifestyle

This help sheet discusses health and lifestyle choices for people with a diagnosis of younger onset dementia and their families and carers.

Fatigue, stress or physical illness can affect everyone's ability to think and act as usual. People with younger onset dementia may be particularly susceptible to such factors because their thinking abilities are already likely to be affected by their dementia. These factors may be more easily managed or in some cases avoided with lifestyle adjustments.

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle

Managing fatigue

Fatigue impacts on a person's ability to focus on tasks and maintain attention over time. This in turn has an impact on memory and behaviour. Fatigue can also have an impact on completing tasks by reducing reaction time, attention and coordination. In some circumstances, the impact of fatigue could be dangerous, such as when driving or operating machinery. Encourage the person with dementia to:

- Establish a simpler daily routine which may help to eliminate or lessen the impact of stress or fatigue.
- Encourage the person to get adequate sleep and take regular breaks throughout the day.
- Try to complete important tasks at the time of day when the person is generally most alert and least fatigued. Often this is in the morning.

Maintaining appropriate nutrition and hydration

A poor diet can affect energy levels, physical health as well as attention and memory. Younger onset dementia can also interfere with a person's sensation of hunger or thirst, or it may affect their ability to say when they're hungry or thirsty.

- It is important to eat a balanced diet, with a variety of fruits and vegetables.
- Try to eat at set regular intervals, every day.
- Seek advice from a professional such as a nutritionist or dietician to see if particular dietary plans or supplements are recommended. This is especially important if the person with younger onset dementia has other health conditions such as diabetes.
- Periodic checks for vitamin and mineral levels (such as B12) should be done as certain deficiencies can specifically affect brain functioning.
- It is essential to drink sufficient water throughout the day to avoid dehydration. Dehydration can cause fatigue and affect performance. Dehydration can also lead to a reversible condition called delirium. If delirium is suspected, seek prompt medical advice.

Managing pain

Pain, whether acute or chronic, makes it hard for anyone to pay attention and concentrate, and pain can be particularly distressing for people with younger onset dementia, who may be less able to express their pain and receive appropriate treatment. For people with younger onset dementia, the onset, type or location of pain may be difficult to communicate and may lead to increased irritability, frustration or behavioural problems.

- Be alert to changes in routine or behaviour. Agitated behaviour or reluctance to move may be a sign of pain.
- Seek medical assessment and advice regarding any obvious or on-going pain.
- Have pain medications regularly reviewed by a GP or pharmacist.
- In many cases relaxation techniques or physical therapies such as massage may help to reduce pain (such as headaches, or muscular pain).

Monitoring alcohol intake

- Alcohol, even in moderate quantities, can affect mental performance. Limiting alcohol consumption and avoiding excess consumption is very important for a person with younger onset dementia. Family, friends and colleagues can all play a role in helping a person with younger onset dementia to do so.
- Alcohol can also lower mood and is best avoided if someone is already suffering from depression.
- Alcohol can interact with a lot of medications. Seek medical advice or talk to a pharmacist about the effects of alcohol and medications.

Managing stress

Stress is common among people with younger onset dementia for a range of reasons including their changing circumstances and changing abilities. Stress can have a marked impact on thinking and behaviour, but may be minimised by adopting strategies to reduce its effects.

- Establish a daily routine and keep changes to a minimum.
- Keep any tasks to a level at which the person with dementia can feel a sense of control and achievement.
- Remember that things which may not be stressful for family and carers (for example, a cancelled appointment or a spilt drink), may be stressful for a person with younger onset dementia.
- Relaxation techniques such as listening to peaceful music or meditation are helpful for some people.
- Simple explanations and reassurance can be useful in stressful situations.
- Professional help may be warranted, such as the advice of a doctor, psychologist, counsellor, or other health professional.

Participating in physical activity

Physical activity can help to maintain a person's alertness, concentration, attention and memory. It may also reduce stress and anxiety, and improve mood. People with younger onset dementia are often more fit and physically able than people with dementia over the age of 65. If possible, encourage the person with younger onset dementia to maintain moderate to high levels of physical activity as long as possible and try to help provide opportunities for the person to be active.

- Physical activity can be used as a means of diverting a behavioural problem in a person with younger onset dementia. For example, encouraging the person with dementia to go for a walk when they feel confused, overwhelmed, or angry, could defuse and prevent a reaction to a difficult situation.
- Regular physical activity stimulates brain functioning and may help to improve or maintain cognitive performance in the medium term.
- Physical activity may help reduce the susceptibility of a person with younger onset dementia to depression or other health problems.
- People with younger onset dementia can often continue to participate in sporting clubs or teams. Consider informing the organisation or peers about the younger onset dementia diagnosis and asking for assistance to make changes to suit the person's changing needs (for example, assigning a golf-buddy to help keep score). An advocate may also be able to help.
- Try to include the person with younger onset dementia in the daily household routine, such as housework and gardening.

Keeping the brain active

Stimulating the brain has been shown in some cases to help slow cognitive decline. It may also assist with mood and maintaining self-esteem.

- Activities such as playing cards, reading, simple board games or any other activities within an individual's capacity should be encouraged on a regular basis.
- Previous hobbies such as painting or working with simple tools that the person enjoyed doing before the diagnosis, should continue to be encouraged on a regular basis.

Keeping socially engaged

Social engagement and remaining active in the community may increase well-being for people with dementia, just as they do for everyone.

- Try to maintain existing social contacts and usual social engagements. Participating in social activities and interacting with others exercises brain cells and strengthens the connections between them.
- Consider joining a support group. There are many social support and activity groups appropriate for both a person with younger onset dementia and their carers. For example, a social cafe, a Heart Foundation walking group, or a Men's Shed.
- The person with younger onset dementia may wish to join a group or activity alone or with their family or partner.
- Be aware that not all groups will suit the needs of an individual with younger onset dementia. In some situations, or over time, a noisy group activity may begin to cause anxiety or confusion for the person with dementia, so it is important to monitor their response in order to avoid distress to the person.

For more ideas go to www.yourbrainmatters.org.au

Further Information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**, or visit our website at dementia.org.au



For language assistance phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**