

Going to hospital

This help sheet provides information to make a hospital admission easier for you and for the person with dementia.

A hospital admission can be stressful for anyone. Hospitals are noisy places, difficult to navigate, there are constant interruptions and staff regularly change.

Telling a person with dementia about going to hospital

Whether to tell a person with dementia they are going to hospital will depend on a number of factors such as the extent of memory loss and anticipated anxiety about going. Telling the person and involving them in the planning will be best for many people.

For those people with dementia who, when given an appointment time, want to leave immediately and repeatedly ask, “When are we going?”, it may be best not to tell until the last minute. This will mean packing without including them in the preparation. When you do tell them, be prepared to leave within the next few hours.

The suggestion that they need to go to hospital should be made in a calm and gentle manner, so that this relaxed approach sets the pace for their reaction.

Preparation for hospital

Avoid buying new clothes for the hospital stay. With so many other new areas to cope with it may become overwhelming.

If new items cannot be avoided, where possible allow the person with dementia to become familiar with them in advance of the admission date. If it is necessary to buy more than one of an item, make them all the same. Label all belongings clearly and leave valuables at home.

Full involvement in packing will be best for some people with dementia. For others, it may be better if you make suggestions about what to take and let the person confirm your choice. In some cases, it may be better to avoid any mention of hospital preparation.

You will generally know which approach will be best. Do not assume that a person with dementia understands everything simply because they have participated in their packing.

Arrival at the hospital

Try to arrange admission during a quiet time at the hospital. Pre-planning the trip, including where to park and how to get to Admissions will help you to concentrate on the needs of the person with dementia, rather than worrying about finding your way around. If possible, take another person with you to help.

Always let hospital staff know in advance, if possible, that your relative or friend has a diagnosis of dementia. This will assist them to provide appropriate care.

Inform staff of the preferred name, normal routine and likes and dislikes of the person with dementia. Include information about any things that might cause agitation and strategies for managing these, as well as advice about settling in at night, hygiene procedures and toileting. Writing this information down can be helpful for the hospital as it can be placed on file so that all staff can read it.

Take all medications with you, including alternative and herbal remedies. In addition, write down the names of all medications and dosages as this too can be placed on the file. Inform staff of any preferred ways of taking medications.

There is considerable benefit in packing several familiar objects such as family photos, pillow or slippers. A simple calendar or a statement of where they are, left by the bed, can help reduce confusion.

Unplanned admissions

Keeping an up-to-date list of medications and dosages is a good idea, even if a hospital visit is not planned. It can be very useful to have on hand in the event of a medical emergency. It is useful to keep a bag with familiar clothes, general information and emergency numbers. Don't forget to go through it regularly to make sure that the information is up to date.

Introducing the person to the ward

Try to accompany the person with dementia to the ward. Introduce their nurse as a safe person who they can talk to or ask for help, no matter what their needs may be.

It is very important for the carer to connect with the staff. Having a main contact person will make the process easier by being able to clarify all the required information and outline the needs of the person with dementia.

Leaving the person at the hospital

Let the nursing staff know when you are intending to leave the hospital, so that they can take over and reduce the risk of a patient with dementia being left without support.

Most families and carers will have had some experience of leaving the person they care for at a day program or with relatives or friends, and so will know what works best for the person with dementia when it is time to leave.

For some people, it may be less stressful for all if you make an excuse to temporarily leave the bedside. Some people find it useful to leave with a promise to retrieve an item or treat for their benefit. Stating that you have to leave for your own reasons may not be as readily accepted. Meal times can be a good time to leave, as food may offer a distraction to your departure.

In certain circumstances, some hospitals allow family members to stay overnight.

Coming back to visit

When you return, you may be met with indignation or anger. If this happens, empathise with their reaction then focus on something more desirable. Use quiet, soothing language and positive conversation.

Some visitors can be unsure about touching for fear of hurting the patient or of dislodging medical equipment. It is important that the person with dementia feels close to their visitors. If visitors are used to holding hands or kissing, this should continue in hospital. Touch is important, especially if the person with dementia is feeling unsure or afraid. This is often a good time to give a hand massage. Staff can advise how to continue physical contact if medical equipment is making this difficult.

Have a sheet of paper where visitors can leave their names, so that the person with dementia can reassure himself or herself that people have visited.

Wanting to go home prematurely

If a person with dementia is asking to come home don't blame being in hospital on the doctors and nurses. Hospital staff are the people that they need to have confidence in, especially for any future treatment.

It may help to pretend annoyance that the stay is so long for them, but at the same time point out that it is an opportunity to get positively spoilt. Don't forget to emphasise that the hospital is looking after them extremely well.

Discharge

Sometimes it will be best to avoid telling a person with dementia of an impending discharge, because they may wish to leave immediately. Instead, tell them at the precise time of discharge so that they can leave straight away.

Ask staff to put in writing anything that you need to know. It is also a good idea to keep in touch with the person's GP so that they can go back to someone familiar and be reassured about any part of the treatment.

After discharge

Avoid stopping on the way home for any reason. The hospital has been an overwhelming and stimulating experience and a person with dementia will need to re-establish themselves in their home environment with as little interruption as possible. They may be tired as a result of being unwell.

Once at home, be prepared to spend some quiet time engaging the person with dementia in an activity that interests them, for example, music or photos.

Note

Some of these strategies may seem excessive, dishonest or overprotective and you might feel uncomfortable carrying them out. You may wish to explain every step in the process to the person with dementia as you once did when their memory was intact. However this may not be effective now, and may cause stress when they cannot fully comprehend the facts.

Comfort and peace of mind are essential for both physical and mental well-being. The aim of this information is to help make the hospital stay more comfortable for a person with dementia, their family and carers.

Based on **When someone in your care has memory loss and needs to go to hospital** by Beryl Mason CNC, Jenny Hales, Social Worker and the nursing consortium of Central Coast Health, NSW

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**