

Pain

This help sheet discusses some of the causes of pain and how to recognise it in a person with dementia. There are tips about how to treat pain and what can happen if it is not recognised and left untreated.

People with dementia experience physical pain for the same reasons everyone else does. But because of their declining brain function, they may not be able to accurately interpret pain signals, nor clearly communicate their discomfort. They may convey their pain through changed behaviours. As a result, the pain often goes unnoticed and untreated and may cause further harm.

However, carers can take extra steps to look for non-verbal signs of pain and provide effective pain management.

Causes of pain

Potential causes of pain are the same for people with dementia as they are for everyone else.

Common causes of pain include:

- arthritis
- osteoporosis
- old injuries, such as a hip fracture
- back problems
- cancer
- angina
- nerve damage
- post-stroke pain syndromes
- constipation and urinary tract infections
- pressure sores
- sitting or lying in one position for too long

- foot problems
- dental problems
- infections
- undetected or untreated injuries
- migraines or headaches
- mood disorders.

A thorough assessment may be needed to determine the cause of pain, especially in a person with dementia who may be unable to tell you their symptoms.

Recognising pain

In the early stages of dementia, people may be able to say when they are in pain. But their changes in thinking abilities may make them less able to understand why they are feeling pain and to know what to do about it. They may not be able to identify where the pain is or how strong it is, or the person may not remember to take pain relief medication.

When someone with dementia has difficulty communicating, you will need to recognise their pain in other ways. Some behaviours and symptoms may indicate that a person has some level of pain or discomfort or is unwell.

These may include:

- changes in behaviour, such as appearing withdrawn, lethargic, frustrated or angry
- sleeping more than usual
- crying
- facial or verbal expressions indicating a particular part of the body is sore
- a reluctance to move.

Asking about pain

When you ask someone with dementia to describe how they are feeling, try to use words that might help. Ask at regular intervals, not just once.

Words you might use are:

- pain
- uncomfortable
- hurting
- aching
- sore.

Treating pain

If someone with dementia is experiencing pain, they should generally be seen by a doctor to find the best treatment.

For minor pain such as headache, paracetamol can usually be used safely without seeing a doctor. For more significant or ongoing pain, stronger medicines may be needed.

Medications are prescribed to prevent and relieve pain across 24 hours. It is important to follow your doctor's advice about when to give medication.

Different therapies can also be used to help alleviate pain, either alone or in combination with a medication.

These may include:

- massage
- heat or cold packs
- gentle exercise and stretching
- physiotherapy
- acupuncture
- relaxation
- a bath.

Untreated pain can have serious consequences

If someone with dementia has pain that is unrecognised and untreated, they may suffer needlessly and be prescribed inappropriate treatments.

If a person is withdrawn or distressed because of untreated pain, they may be assumed to be depressed and prescribed antidepressants. Chronic pain can make a person depressed, but both the pain and depression should be relieved by effectively treating the underlying pain.

If a person becomes aggressive or agitated because of pain, antipsychotics may be prescribed, which potentially have serious side effects. Again, treating the underlying pain should alleviate the resulting changed behaviours.

Ongoing pain can lead to mobility problems that can affect someone's daily life and increase their risk of injury. Persistent pain can also affect someone's thinking and worsen their dementia symptoms. Failing to recognise and treat pain in people with dementia can impact their quality of life and lead to poor medical outcomes.

If the person is living in residential care

It is possible for pain to sometimes go unrecognised and untreated in residential care. Talk with the doctor and nursing staff if you are concerned that a resident may be in pain. Your knowledge of the behavioural signs of pain is important to help staff recognise that the person is in pain. Ensure staff are assessing for pain regularly and that it is being managed effectively. Good residential care practices aim to improve the management of pain in people with dementia.

How to help

People with dementia should have any pain treated quickly and effectively.

Where to get help

National Dementia Helpline

The National Dementia Helpline is a free telephone service that provides information, advice, counselling and carer support. Ask about support groups and programs for family and carers.

Call: **1800 100 500**

Visit: dementia.org.au/helpline

Carer Gateway

Carer Gateway provides free practical information, resources, education and counselling to support carers.

Call: **1800 422 737**

Visit: carergateway.gov.au

Additional reading and resources

- Dementia Australia library service
Visit: dementia.org.au/library
- Dementia Australia support
Visit: dementia.org.au/support
- Dementia Australia education
Visit: dementia.org.au/education

Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500

For language assistance: 131 450

Visit our website: dementia.org.au