

Getting dressed

This help sheet explains how dementia can impact a person's ability to perform daily tasks, such as getting dressed. It offers families and carers practical suggestions to support someone who needs help.

Dementia can impact on a person's ability to perform daily tasks. Daily tasks such as dressing are important to maintain routine.

Getting dressed is a complex task, because there are many steps to complete. Some people living with dementia may need more time to get dressed, or they may need support for part or all of this task.

Why someone may need support

There are different reasons why someone with dementia may need support getting dressed.

Physical or medical changes

These may include:

- changes in recognising when and how to get dressed
- changes in ability to keep their balance
- changes in hand coordination, such as doing up buttons or a zip
- changes in vision and recognising what they see
- side effects of medications
- depression, mood changes and loss of interest.

What to try

- A medical examination could assess changes in ability, such as memory, balance and hand coordination, and check for possible causes such as depression.
- An eye test could assess changes in vision.

Difficulties when dressing

Some people may need support to get dressed, because the person:

- may not remember if they are getting dressed or undressed
- may forget to change their clothes
- may put on their clothes in the wrong order
- may put on too many layers of clothes
- may recognise an item as clothing, but not know how to wear it.

What to try

- Use gestures and speak slowly in a respectful, non-patronising way to encourage the person to get dressed independently.
- Set out clothes in the order they need to be put on.
- Remove out-of-season clothes from the wardrobe.
- Break the task of getting dressed into simple, manageable steps and take one step at a time. You may need to gently remind the person for each step, or do several of the steps yourself. It will make the task more pleasurable for both of you if you give reassurance and praise for each successful step.

Distractions in the room

Someone with dementia who is trying to get dressed can be distracted by different factors in the room, such as:

- noise
- other people
- clutter
- feeling too hot or too cold
- lighting levels being too dim or too bright.

What to try:

- Keep the room quiet and clear away clutter.
- Ensure the room temperature is comfortable for the person.
What you may find too hot, they may find quite comfortable.

- If possible, adjust bathroom and wardrobe lighting to be at the same level of brightness as the room they are dressing in, so the person doesn't have to adjust to different lighting levels.

Lack of privacy

Getting dressed is a personal and private activity. Many people can feel uncomfortable getting dressed or undressed in front of someone.

They may also find it difficult to accept your assistance.

What to try

- Discuss with the person how they are feeling and what support they would like.
- Close the door and lower blinds for privacy.
- If the person can manage most tasks, leave them alone and offer support from a distance when necessary.

Deciding what to wear

It is important to encourage someone with dementia to choose their own clothing, although they may find making these decisions challenging.

Some people with dementia cannot judge how many layers to wear or their sensation of hot and cold may be impaired. If wearing extra clothes appears comfortable for them, don't be concerned about this.

What to try

- Label clothing drawers and compartments to help with locating different items.
- Simplify choices by offering a choice of two outfits, or two different coloured shirts.
- Lay articles of clothing out in the order someone would put them on.
- For someone with visual problems, try laying out clothes against a contrasting background: for example, dark clothing on a light-coloured bedspread.
- Remove out-of-season clothes and other outfits.

Shopping for clothing and footwear

Maintaining someone's individuality and style of dress is important. Consider that introducing a new style may create challenges.

However, the following tips may help with shopping for clothing and footwear:

- Choose clothes that are washable and do not need ironing.
- If doing up buttons, hooks, zips and buckles is challenging, try replacing them with hook and loop fasteners.
- Busy, bright patterned clothes can be distracting. Choose simple patterns and solid contrasting colours, because they are often easier for people to see.
- Slip-on shoes are easier to put on than shoes with laces or buckles. Ensure they have non-skid soles.
- If the person wants to wear the same clothes day after day, buy a couple of the same outfits.

Other considerations

- The person may not want to change clothes as often as you would like. Try not to impose your own values about how often clothes need changing or about mixing colours and styles.
- Be aware that being reminded to change your clothes can be embarrassing and humiliating.
- Taking time to maintain someone's independence is worthwhile. Being able to dress yourself can make the person with dementia feel more independent and build feelings of pride and self-esteem.
- Dementia can affect some people's inhibitions; they may undress themselves frequently. You may be embarrassed or feel inconvenienced, but the person may no longer understand what is appropriate and is usually not trying to be provocative.

Evaluate the situation

If you can, ask the person living with dementia:

- if they are too warmly dressed
- whether they need to go to the toilet
- if they are trying to get ready for bed because they are tired
- whether they are bored.

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

The Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service supports people living with dementia who experience changes in behaviour that impact their care or the carer.

Call: **1800 699 799**

Additional reading and resources

- Dementia Australia library
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