

At home with dementia

Tips for making your home dementia friendly



Information written with you in mind.

This information guide has been produced with the help of older people and carers as well as expert peer reviewers.

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Contents

Who this guide is for	4
What this guide is about	5
Care needs assessment	6
Getting around your home and hallways	7
Into the kitchen	8
On to the living room	9
The bedroom	10
Thinking about the bathroom	11
Lighting	12
Getting out and about	14
General tips for the whole home	16
If you're reading this as a friend, carer or family member	18
Useful organisations	20



Who this guide is for

If you or someone you care for is living with dementia, there are some practical things you can do at home to make life easier.

For the purpose of this guide we'll assume you're living with dementia. But if you're reading this for someone else, you'll still find the guide useful as it helps you know what can help them stay as independent as possible for as long as possible. There's information specifically for carers and relatives on page 18.

Next steps

It's a good idea to find out the number for your local council. They'll be able to provide a lot of the support and information mentioned in this guide.

My local council number is:

What this guide is about

The design and layout of your home can have a big impact on your daily life. Things might seem like they're getting a bit tricky, or you may be fine with how things are and want them to stay that way for as long as possible. A few changes in the home can make a real difference.

This guide takes you around the house, giving you some basic tips on how to adapt different areas of your home to your circumstances. It is meant to be a toolbox of suggestions and tips – not all of them will work for everyone so choose what you think will work for you.

It contains suggestions for adaptations and practical changes to consider. Depending on what changes you make, they could:

- help you to live safely and independently in your own home for as long as possible
- minimise problems which may arise down the line
- help family members or carers to have peace of mind.

It may seem overwhelming thinking of what the future could hold, but it's worth realising that while symptoms of dementia may get worse over time, there are things you can do to stay as independent as you can for as long as you can.

As far as possible, the information in this guide is applicable across the England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Care needs assessment

There are many smaller adaptations you can make yourself and we're going to tell you more about them in this guide. But there may be some larger adaptations or specialist equipment that might help you too, and this should be addressed in a care needs assessment – so it's definitely worth having one.

If you need help with things like washing, dressing or have difficulty with domestic tasks, contact your local council's social services department to ask for a free care needs assessment.

Care needs assessments should be carried out by an assessor qualified to understand your individual needs. They'll look at your needs and consider how care and support could help you. You might want to continue living independently in your home but are finding it difficult. You'll be able to discuss any difficulties you have looking after yourself and the impact these have on your wellbeing.

If you qualify for help, your local council will then draw up a care plan with the support that is available to you, which could include adaptations or equipment to make your home safer and easier to live in.



Getting around your home and hallways

It's easy to overlook these areas, but stairs and hallways can cause real issues and increase the risk of a fall.

- Rugs and mats at the top or bottom of the stairs are a trip hazard and can easily lead to a stumble, so it's a good idea to move them out of the way.
- Getting up and down steps can be tricky and daunting. Something to mark the edge of each step, be it paint or anti-slip tape for example, can really help you judge their depth and feel more confident when getting around. But do make sure any tape is stuck down well.
- Sometimes the threshold between rooms can look like a step, something on the floor or something you need to step over. Having similar floor tones between rooms can allow you to move around more freely.
- It might be useful to have post-it notes or another prompt as you leave the house to remind yourself to pick up your keys and lock the front door.
- If you've wandered out and about, or are worried you might, place curtains over the door or put 'STOP' signs on the inside of the door.

Into the kitchen

The kitchen can be a confusing place at the best of times. We've all stayed at a friend's place and struggled to find the cupboard with the mugs in it. Living with dementia can make this a day-to-day struggle in our own homes. Some small changes can make things a lot easier.

- Leave out everyday items to make sure they're easy to find.
- Label cupboards and drawers to make it easier to locate what you want. You can also label containers of frequently used items, such as tea and sugar, and keep them in sight or use clear plastic containers so you can see what's inside.
- Labels can work particularly well for things such as cleaning products, to avoid any confusion.
- You also don't want a mouthful of pet food, so keep it very separate from your other food!
- Alternatively, having open shelving units or fitting clear cupboard doors means you can see inside without the need for stickers or labels. This is more costly though.
- You can make yourself charts and step-by-step instructions for tasks such as tea-making to help you keep doing these things independently for longer.
- Using contrasting tones for kitchen utensils makes it easier to identify the crockery and the food. For example, mashed potato on a white plate can be difficult to see. A contrasting plate will make the food more noticeable.
- Be careful, stainless steel appliances such as kettles or toasters can get very hot and could cause a scald or burn.
- You may start cooking and forget you've left the cooker on. Some newer cookers have automatic shut-off mechanisms which can turn the cooker off after a set amount of time.

On to the living room

Everybody wants to feel cosy, comfortable and safe in their living room. Some small adjustments can help it stay a relaxed and reassuring place.

- Remove any trip hazards like rugs, trailing wires, and clutter from the room to help prevent falls.
- Avoid glass furniture, such as coffee tables, as it's harder to see and could cause you to trip.
- Photos of family members, friends, occasions and old photos from childhood can be comforting and trigger memories. You might want to label photos with names and relationships to help you remember exactly who's who.
- Listening to music and the radio can have a calming effect and remind you of your favourite tunes.



The bedroom

Adapting the bedroom doesn't necessarily involve buying expensive equipment. There are lots of simple changes that can make a difference.

- Install a night light if you often get up during the night. If you think a night light could disturb you, you might want to consider installing a motion-activated light that only comes on when you get out of bed.
- Pressure mats can be placed under the mattress or beside the bed that detect if you get up and don't return to bed within a certain time. This then alerts an emergency response centre or a chosen contact, such as a friend or relative.
- Use bedding that contrasts in tone with the floor to make sure the bed is visible. You might prefer a plain colour, as highly patterned duvets and blankets can be visually confusing.
- Too much choice can be a problem for everyone – especially when it comes to deciding what to wear. You can make things a bit easier by trying not to keep too many clothes, shoes or cosmetics on shelves or in wardrobes.
- If you're starting to find it difficult to get dressed and put your clothes on in the right order, you could lay the clothes out in the order they should be put on, with underwear first.
- We can all leave our bedroom in a bit of a mess but it's best to remove any trip hazards like clothes on the floor, trailing wires, rugs and clutter to help prevent falls.
- It might be a good idea to keep special mementos in a safe place, and possibly use a label to remind yourself where you've put them. Small pieces of jewellery can be easy to misplace so make full use of a jewellery box.

Thinking about the bathroom

Not being able to find the toilet when you need it can be very stressful. The bathroom is a space that is used a lot so it's important that it's a safe environment and easy to get to.

- Paint the bathroom door a bright colour, use a sign on the door, or leave the door open so the room can be seen easily.
- Set the water heater to a safe temperature.
- Buy plugs that change colour when the water is above a certain temperature to let you know to be careful.
- Buy plugs that let water out automatically when the bath becomes too full.
- Having a different coloured lid and seat on the toilet makes it much easier to see.
- Keep medicines safely out of reach. Put those you need available in an automated pill box. You could also clear out the medicine cabinet and ask your local chemist to dispose of out-of-date or unwanted medications.
- If you find mirrors confusing you can cover them up, and then still use them when needed.
- Think about changing your sink or taps to separate hot and cold taps that are labelled well.
- It can also help to have grab rails by the toilet or in the bath or shower that contrast with the surface beneath or behind them so they can be recognised more easily.
- Following a care needs assessment, you may find that a bigger change to your bathroom is needed. See page 6 for more information.

Lighting

Unfortunately, as we get older our eyesight gets worse, so it's really important to make sure where you live is lit properly. This is even more important when living with dementia.

- Use brighter lightbulbs or lamps to brighten up darker areas of your home.
- Open your curtains during the day to let as much natural light in as possible.
- Install nightlights or motion activated lights that come on if you get up in the night.
- More vibrant colours make a room feel and look brighter, and reflect more light, so it can be a good idea to use bright colours for walls, furniture and furnishings where possible – though it's best to avoid patterns.
- Have even lighting around the home to minimise shadows.
- Light on a shiny floor can produce glare and be mistaken for a puddle, so try to minimise this where possible, for example by using blinds.
- Avoid using spotlights where possible as they can cast shadows on faces and make it harder to see people.
- Make sure windows are clean and not blocked by anything outside, such as bushes or plants, to get as much natural light into the home as possible.
- Use coloured tape or labels to highlight light switches.

Anne and her daughter have made some simple adaptations to help her stay independent.

Anne, 73, used labels around the home to make her life a bit easier.

'I'd started to notice I was getting a little more confused around the house. I was struggling with the television remote, and I was finding it hard to remember where things should go after I did the washing up.

'My daughter made some labels and stuck them up around the place. The kitchen cupboards, remote control and light switches are now all labelled. It seemed like such a simple change, but it's made all the difference. Now the cutlery doesn't go walkabout!'



Getting out and about

Getting fresh air is good for your physical and mental wellbeing so try and go out if you can. If you enjoy going for a walk, gardening or sitting outdoors, then a few adjustments can help you continue to do this as safely and independently as possible.

- Fitting exterior handrails make the garden and outside areas more accessible and can also help you feel steadier.
- You could mark the edges of steps outside with non-slip tape or paint so that you can see them more easily to avoid a fall – but make sure the tape is stuck down properly.
- If you like gardening, get a set of tools that have brightly coloured, long, or easy-grip handles to make it a bit easier. The organisation Thrive provides support for older and disabled people to do gardening. Contact them for further advice (see page 22).
- Install a police-approved key safe. These are used to lock away spare keys securely and can only be opened using a code or password. Only trusted friends, relatives or neighbours should be given the code, so they can access the property when needed.
- You may be eligible for a Blue Badge if you have reduced mobility. This allows you to use disabled parking spaces, which are often closer to the shops.
- Some local councils offer subsidised taxi schemes, which may help you stay independent if you don't feel able to drive and don't feel confident using public transport.
- Put a 'no cold callers' sign at the front door to deter doorstep sellers. See our guide **Avoiding scams** for more information.

- You might want to tell your neighbours about your diagnosis so they can help out if needed. This could help you feel more reassured that they were keeping an eye on things.
- If you want to, let people in your local area, such as the staff at your favourite café, know you have dementia. That way they can offer assistance if ever needed.
- Keep a Helpcard in your wallet or purse. These say that you have dementia and contain basic personal information and contact details in case of emergency or if you need assistance. Contact the Alzheimer's Society for more information (see page 21).
- If you're worried about getting lost when out and about, there are tracking devices available, some in the form of a watch or a small mobile device. You can take these with you wherever you go. They allow a loved one to see where you are which can be really reassuring.



General tips for the whole home

There are some general changes you can make around your home to allow you to keep doing the things you've always done and stay independent for as long as possible.

- Talk to your local council or fire and rescue service about what they provide and whether you might be eligible for free equipment.
- Keep a list of important contacts, such as loved ones and anyone else you think may be useful, by the phone.
- Buy a clock that has the day of the week, date and time clearly displayed.
- Replace patterned carpets with plain ones, as patterned carpets or rugs can sometimes look like uneven ground or a hole. It can also be a good idea to make sure your curtains aren't patterned either.
- Place signs/labels around the home so you can identify where things are or which door leads to which room. They can be especially helpful if they include a picture as well as text.
- It's easy for things to get a little cluttered, but try and keep things cleared away where possible. Clutter can be confusing on the eye and be a trip hazard.
- You should think about using an automated pill box. Some have an alarm to indicate when medicine needs to be taken. Others can be programmed so they allow access to medication only at the time it's needed.

- There are also flood, gas or heat detectors which sound an alarm directly to a response centre or to a chosen contact, such as a family member. Some gas detectors can also switch off the gas supply when they detect a problem.
- Personal alarms allow you to call for help, for example if you're unwell or have a fall and can't reach a telephone. The alarm allows the person wearing it to contact a 24-hour response centre by pressing a button on a pendant or wristband that they wear. Staff at the emergency response centre will then call either a chosen contact person – a neighbour, relative or friend – or, if the situation is more urgent, the emergency services. A personal alarm can provide peace of mind, although they may not be suitable for everyone living with dementia.
- Smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors should be installed in or near the kitchen and in all sleeping areas. Check regularly that alarms are working, ideally twice a year. It's also possible to install alarms that trigger an alert to a call centre or a nominated person such as a carer.



If you're reading this as a friend or family member

As a friend or family member of someone living with dementia, you may be wondering what you can do to help.

Having dementia can make it difficult for people to do some practical things. This could affect their day-to-day life and it may help if they can make little changes to how they do things.

It's important that, where possible, families and friends support the person to do things for themselves rather than 'taking over'.

Change in itself can be difficult for people with dementia to manage, so if you decide to make any changes in the home, they should be determined by what the person living with dementia needs and what works for them. This increases the person's wellbeing and helps maintain their dignity, confidence and self-esteem.

Not all of the changes highlighted in this guide will be needed or work for everyone. Some of these suggestions may be helpful now, while others may be better in the future or more appropriate if you don't live with the person with dementia.

When considering changes, there are things to bear in mind:

- **Involve the person with dementia as much as possible.** Depending on the extent of their condition, try to approach this as a team and work together to find solutions. Focus on changes that support the person to do things that they enjoy, rather than restricting their activities. Think about their likes and dislikes too.
- **Focus one one or two things at a time**, as conversations about lots of different changes can be overwhelming. We can all be overwhelmed when there are too many choices.

- **Don't make unnecessary changes.** Someone with dementia may struggle to learn something new or adapt to changes in their home, especially if things are moved or replaced with something unfamiliar. Where possible, keep things in the same places, and if you buy new equipment or furniture try to find items that work in a similar way and are familiar in shape, colour or brand.
- **Agree any changes sooner rather than later,** so the person living with dementia has time to adjust and get used to them. It's possible that they may forget that they have agreed to any changes.
- **Seek advice and information about making changes in the home.** You could consult an occupational therapist, as they work with people to help them identify what aids or home adaptations may be helpful. You should be able to arrange an assessment through your local adult social services, your doctor, or privately.

Next steps

For more general information about being a carer, see our guide **Advice for carers**.

To find out more about dementia, read our guides **Caring for someone with dementia** and **Living with early-stage dementia**.

Useful organisations

Age UK

We provide advice and information for people in later life through our Age UK Advice line, publications and website.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65

Lines are open seven days a week from 8am to 7pm.

www.ageuk.org.uk

Call Age UK Advice to find out whether there is a local Age UK near you, and to order free copies of our information guides and factsheets.

In Wales, contact Age Cymru: **0800 022 3444**

www.agecymru.org.uk

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI: **0808 808 7575**

www.ageni.org

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland: **0800 12 442 22**

www.agescotland.org.uk

Alzheimer's Society

Offers advice, information and support in England and Wales to people with dementia, their families and carers through its helpline and local branches.

National Dementia Helpline: **0300 222 1122**

www.alzheimers.org.uk

www.alzheimers.org.uk/wales

In Northern Ireland, contact Alzheimer's NI

Tel: **028 9066 4100**

AT Dementia

Provides information on assistive technology that can help people with dementia live more independently.

Tel: **0115 748 4220**

www.atdementia.org.uk

Dementia Adventure

They provide adventure activities and holidays for people living with dementia and their friends and family. They can also signpost to dementia friendly holiday venues.

Tel: **01245 237 548**

www.dementiaadventure.co.uk

Dementia UK

Works to improve the quality of life of people with dementia. Contact them to find out if you have an Admiral Nurse service in your local area.

Admiral nursing direct helpline: **0800 888 6678**

Tel: **020 8036 5400**

www.dementiauk.org

Disabled Living Foundation

Runs an equipment demonstration centre and provides information about equipment for daily living.

Tel: **0300 999 0004**

www.dlf.org.uk

www.livingmadeeasy.org.uk

Research Institute for Disabled Consumers (RiDC)

National research charity providing independent information to older and disabled consumers.

Tel: **020 7427 2460**

www.ridc.org.uk

Thrive

Helps people with disabilities enjoy gardening.

Tel: **0118 988 5688**

www.thrive.org.uk

Help us be there for someone else

We hope you found this guide helpful. When times are tough, it's so important to get some support. Did you know you could help us reach someone else who needs a little help? Here's how:

1

Give your views on guides like this

Our Readers' Panel helps make sure the information we produce is right for older people and their families. We'd love you to join. Go to www.ageuk.org.uk/publications/readers-panel.

2

Donate to us

Every donation we receive helps us be there for someone when they need us. To make a donation, call us on **0800 169 8787** or go to www.ageuk.org.uk/donate.

3

Volunteer with us

Our volunteers make an incredible difference to people's lives. Get involved by contacting your local Age UK or at www.ageuk.org.uk/volunteer.

4

Campaign with us

We campaign to make life better for older people, and rely on the help of our strong network of campaigners. Add your voice to our latest campaigns at www.ageuk.org.uk/campaigns.

5

Remember us in your will

A gift to Age UK in your will is a very special way of helping older people get expert support in the years to come. Find out more by calling **020 3033 1421** or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/legacy.

What should I do now?

You may want to read some of our other relevant guides, such as:

- **Living with early-stage dementia**
- **Caring for someone with dementia**

You can order any of our guides or factsheets by giving our Advice Line a ring for free on **0800 169 65 65** (8am-7pm, 365 days a year).

Our friendly advisers will also be able to help answer any questions you have about anything you've read.

All of our publications are available in large print and audio formats.

There's plenty of really useful information on our website, too. Visit **www.ageuk.org.uk/dementia** to get started.

If contact details for your local Age UK are not in the below box, call Age UK Advice free on **0800 169 65 65**.



0800 169 65 65
www.ageuk.org.uk



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