

Activities of Daily Living & Other Problems

Washing & bathing



For most adults, washing is a personal and private activity. Carers need to be sensitive and tactful when offering help or when trying to persuade someone with dementia to keep clean. It is important to respect the person's dignity. A flexible approach often works best. Here are some suggestions.

As the illness progresses the person with dementia may need reminders or help to wash. Sometimes they may be very reluctant and you will need to find ways to encourage them which do not cause distress. If you are finding it difficult to persuade the person to wash or if they need more assistance than you can give, contact the public health nurse, who may be able to advise or to arrange help. You can contact the public health nurse through your local health centre.

Encourage independence

Encourage the person to wash themselves for as long as possible.

- Try reminding them of the next step, tactfully indicating the part to be washed or they might like to have some assistance from you like handing them the soap or towel.
- Continue with familiar washing routines established before they developed dementia. A shower each morning or a weekly bath with a stand-up wash on days in between, undressing in the bedroom or using particular towels. It's worth taking a little time to analyse which routine works best.

Sensible precautions

- Check that the bathroom floor is not slippery.
- Make sure that the room is warm before they undress. Older people are more sensitive to heat and cold.
- Check the water temperature of the bath or shower. It should not be too hot or cold.

- Remove locks from the bathroom door or replace them with those that can be opened from the outside. The person may lock themselves in and become panicky or even go into the bathroom to wash and forget why they are there.

General tips

If you are helping someone to wash, try to make it as pleasant and relaxed as possible.

- Make sure everything is in place before you start.
- Use the opportunity to communicate and, if necessary, to explain what you are doing.
- When they are undressed, check for any red or sore areas of skin or skin rashes. These should be discussed with the GP or public health nurse.
- Use a mild soap and make sure all traces are rinsed off.
- Make sure the person is thoroughly dried, especially in the skin folds, otherwise skin may become chaffed and sore.

Aids and equipment

Some aids and equipment may help to make washing easier and enable the person with dementia to feel safer and more in control. An occupational therapist or public health nurse may advise. You can contact an occupational therapist or public health nurse through your local health centre.

Depending on individual circumstances, aids and equipment might include:

- grab rails for getting in and out of the bath
- hand rails by the shower, washbasin or toilet
- non-slip bath or shower mats
- raised toilet seats
- a bath seat or shower stool.

Handling anxieties

Some people with dementia develop anxieties about various aspects of washing.

- They may be worried by the depth of water in the bath but reassured by a shallow bath or if a bath seat is used.
- They may be frightened by the rush of water from an overhead shower and feel happier with a hand-held shower attachment that is easier to control.
- The person may feel ashamed if they are incontinent and try to disguise an 'accident' by refusing to wash. They will need plenty of gentle reassurance. A matter of fact approach often works well as does humour.
- The person may be embarrassed by your presence. Sometimes strategies such as enabling them to keep one part of their body covered while you help them wash the other part may help overcome their embarrassment.
- They may become anxious about being left on their own and need reassurance that you will stay with them all the time.

Washing hair

Washing hair regularly will help the person look and feel better. Using a hand held shower may be the easiest way. Sometimes a person with dementia will prefer to have their hair washed by a hairdresser because they recognise the routine. Some hairdressers will come to the house.

However, some people really dislike having their hair washed. You will have to balance the advantages of clean hair against the disadvantages of creating tension between you.

Using the toilet

Make sure the person wipes themselves properly from front to back after using the toilet, or help them to do so. Wash with mild soap and warm water if they have had an 'accident' or use babywipes, obtainable from a chemist or supermarket.

A flexible approach

Where someone is reluctant to wash, you may find different approaches work at different times. It may depend on the person's mood and the severity of their dementia. Whatever happens, try to remain calm and find a way of coping that does not involve argument or confrontation.

- The person may respond to a gentle reminder or a matter-of-fact approach such as running a bath or putting out clean clothes.
- The person may agree to have a wash because you are going out or someone is visiting.
- It may be a question of timing. For example they may adamantly refuse to wash when you suggest it, but be quite amenable a little while later, or they may be more prepared to wash at certain points in the day.
- Where someone is very confused, it may help if you break the process down into small stages for them. Rather than saying, 'Let's have a wash' you might say 'Let me help you take your dressing gown off' and so on. Handing them the soap and flannel to wash themselves and then the towel to dry themselves may make it easier.
- If bathing or showering lead to conflict or distress, a thorough strip-down wash may be sufficient.
- It is better to remove dirty clothes and substitute clean ones at bedtime or after a bath than to get involved in arguments about the need to change clothing.