Tips for Caring for a Loved One with Dementia

Dementia is a loss of skills to think, remember and reason. The disease can cause changes in the person’s mood and personality and make it hard for the person with dementia to care for him or herself.

As the caregiver, you can learn skills to increase your ability to handle difficult behaviors and make the caring for a loved one less stressful.

Below are tips to help with:

**Agitation**

- Break down complex tasks into smaller, simple steps. Allow your loved one to do as much as possible for himself or herself.
- Limit the number of difficult situations your loved one must face. Shower every other day instead of every day. Schedule more difficult activities for a time of day he or she is less agitated.
- Provide a calm, comforting environment. Keep the same routines.
- Reduce noise, clutter and the number of people in the room.
- Keep rooms well lit and at a comfortable temperature.
- Keep dangerous items out of reach.
- Use a snack or an activity as a distraction.
Bathing

- Set the temperature of the home hot water heater below 120 degrees Fahrenheit to protect from burns.
- Use a non-slip bath mat, grab bars, bath or shower seat, and a hand held shower.
- Have hair washing be a separate activity from bathing or use dry shampoo.
- Drape a towel over your loved one’s body in the bath or shower to provide as much privacy as possible. Uncover only the body part you are washing, leaving the rest covered.
- Think of your loved one’s preferences. Did he or she prefer to take a bath or a shower? What time of day? If bathing is hard, twice a week is enough.
- Have all supplies ready. Do not leave your loved one alone in the bathroom.
- Always check the temperature of the bath or shower and do not allow your loved one to change it.

Eating

- Gently remind your loved one to eat and drink. Hand him or her a cup instead of placing it on the table to encourage drinking.
- Use a straw or a child’s sippy cup if holding a glass is hard.
- Eating with others may remind your loved one what to do and how to eat.
- Finger foods are easy to eat and encourage independence. Meals and snacks can be made entirely of room temperature finger foods.
- Serve soup in a mug.
- Offer smaller meals, more often instead of three large meals each day.
- Offer the foods and drinks your loved one likes to encourage eating.
Incontinence

- Respect your loved one’s privacy and dignity.
- Remind or assist your loved one to use the bathroom every two hours. Look for non-verbal cues such as pulling on clothes and agitation.
- Add grab bars and a raised toilet seat.
- Buy a bedside commode at a medical supply store.
- Use signs to show the way to the bathroom.
- Use incontinence pads and products if needed.
- Have your loved one wear easy to remove clothing with elastic waistbands or Velcro closures.
- Encourage your loved one to drink 6 to 8 cups of fluids each day. Limit drinking in the evening before bedtime. Restrict coffee, tea, soda and alcohol or beer.
- Try a high fiber diet for constipation.

Paranoia

- Do not argue. Tell your loved one that you will help him or her look for missing objects. Learn your loved one’s favorite hiding places. Have extra items of regularly missed objects. Distract with an activity.
- Keep caregivers consistent and explain to caregivers and family that this behavior is normal.
- Respond with a hug or gentle touch.

Repetitive Speech or Action

- Ignore the behavior and use a snack or activity to distract.
- Do not discuss future plans until right before the event.
- Reduce upsets over anticipated events by placing a sign on the kitchen table that says, “Dinner is at 6:30 pm” or “Sue is home at 5:00 pm”.
Sleeplessness or Sundowning

- Restrict sweets and caffeine later in the day.
- Plan more daytime activities. Physical exercise, such as walking, is helpful. Check with the person’s doctor for appropriate activities.
- Discourage afternoon napping.
- Plan a structured, quiet activity in the late afternoon such as a card game or listening to music together.
- Turn on lights well before sunset. Close curtains to reduce shadows.
- Place a nightlight in the bedroom, bathroom and hallway.
- Place clocks where your loved one can see them.
- Allow your loved one to sleep where he or she is most comfortable.
- Lock doors and block stairs with tall gates. Put away dangerous items.
- Install door sensors and motion detectors to alert you when he or she is wandering.
- Talk to your doctor about medicine that may help him or her relax and sleep. Ask if sleeping problems are related to dementia or another medical problem.
- Have others help with caregiving so that you can sleep. Take naps when possible to feel rested.

Wandering

- Do some form of physical activity each day.
- Identify when wandering usually occurs and plan an activity during that time.
- Have ongoing supervision.
- Avoid busy places that can lead to confusion, such as a shopping mall.
- Provide a safe place for wandering such as a fenced in back yard.
- Place a barrier such as a stop sign, do not enter sign, a piece of furniture or a drape to hide the door.
- Hide the doorknob by placing a strip of cloth over it or add child-safe plastic covers.
• Keep car keys out of sight.
• Add an alarm system to alert you that your loved one is leaving a certain area. Your alarm system may just be a few empty cans tied to a string on the doorknob.
• Place a black mat in front of your outside door. This may look like a hole to stop your loved one from going out the door.
• Put away essential items such as your loved one’s coat, purse or glasses. He or she may not leave without these items.
• Have your loved one wear an ID bracelet and sew ID labels in his or her clothing in case the person wanders away from home. Have a current photo ready in case you need to report him or her missing. Consider registering your loved one with the Alzheimer’s Association Safe Return program.
• Consider buying new digital devices that use global positioning systems (GPS) to track the person’s location.
• Tell the neighbors about your loved one’s wandering behavior and give them your phone number.

Talk to your doctor about your loved one’s behavior. There may be a medical problem that is causing the troubling behavior. Behavior is a clue to what your loved one is feeling. Be creative and flexible as you respond to your loved one’s needs.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.