

Welcome to Tips Number 6.

During the time we have all spent at home during COVID-19, you will have observed how the person you are supporting with dementia moves around their home and how they spend their days.

This week we are focusing on home safety and ways you can assist the family member who has dementia to feel safe and secure at home and as independent as possible. Having a safer home environment may also help to reduce some carer stress.

Symptoms of dementia can include confusion, memory loss and disorientation. Your family member may also have problems with mobility and co-ordination.

When looking at possible ways to improve safety in your home: try simple solutions first.

General Guidelines

- Remove clutter. Consider removing furniture or items not frequently used. Clutter can be a trip hazard and impede the free movement of walking aids such as walking sticks and walkers. Some people with dementia find it hard to filter excessive visual cues and so reducing the clutter can help your family see potential trip hazards better.
- Remove loose rugs and seal frayed carpet edges. Check cables for lights/computer equipment are not potential trip hazards.
- Routinely check for liquid spills and wipe area clean/dry as soon as practical.
- Check that there is adequate lighting in parts of the house used by your family member who has dementia.
- Consider installing movement activated light sensors in hall ways and toilet areas.
- Dispose of/or store safely all medications, and hazardous materials. Remove access to guns.
- Consider replacing more dangerous types of heating. (eg bar heater)
- Check thermostats: to control temperature of hot water in shower and taps.
- Install smoke detectors and set up a reminder system to routinely check batteries are in working order.
- If there are young children in the house: be aware of possible trip hazards from toys, and encourage use of designated 'play areas'.
- If your family member has been known to leave the house without others knowing, consider installing alarms/alerts on doors, ranch sliders, garage doors, outside gates etc. (There are some relatively economical alarm products available on line).

- It can be difficult for a person with dementia to see an item that is the same colour as the background. Items such as a white light switch on a light coloured wall or white toilet paper in a light coloured room can disappear. Consider ways you can make these items stand out such as changing the light switch or painting a square around it in a contrasting colour, or using contrasting masking tape.

- Stairs-consider safe lighting. Be cautious if considering installing a child safety gate, as the person with dementia may be tempted to try and climb over it.

- Encourage your family member to routinely wear well- fitting slippers/indoor shoes, with non-slip soles, for use inside the house.

- Computer equipment: Protect valuable personal documents on your computer with passwords and create back-up files. Consider monitoring computer use.

Some people who have advanced dementia may not always recognise themselves in mirrors and may also misinterpret paintings/art work. You may decide to remove/cover some of these items in order to reduce distress.

Memory Prompts

- Have set places in the home for frequently used items. Eg: keys, cell phones/charges.

- Set up a list of important names and phone numbers in large print, placed close to phone.

- Easy to read clocks and large calendars will help to orientate to time.

- Whiteboard.

Lounge

- Avoid clutter. Ensure there are clear areas for the person you are supporting to move freely/safely.

- Chairs with arm rests are easier for people to get in/out of safely. Consider raising low furniture if these are difficult to stand up from or safely sit into. Only use approved furniture raisers or request a Community Occupational Therapy assessment.

- Ranch sliders: consider placing decal stickers at eye level for the person with dementia.

- Consider placing a chair used by the person with dementia close to a window with a street or garden view. Placing a bird feeder in a tree nearby may provide stimulation and enjoyment for your family member.

- If possible have leisure activities which the person may enjoy doing set up in an easy to see and to access place.

- Position photos of close family/friends on display.

Kitchen

- Ensure everyday food/snacks/tea and coffee items are in easy to see and reach places. Put certain foods out of sight.
- Label kitchen cupboards and drawers to help orientate the person with dementia (using single words/photos).
- Routinely turn off stove/microwave at wall, when not in use.
- Disconnect garbage disposal unit.
- Routinely check contents of fridge-discard food which is past its use by date.
- Remove step stools if they may pose a risk.
- If you have pets consider storing their food items out of sight. If the person you are supporting has advanced dementia limit access to pet food.

Bathroom

- Remove locks to the bathroom door-to prevent the person who has dementia accidentally locking themselves in.
- Use a non-slip mat in shower/bath.
- A shower stool can reduce the risk of falls.
- Remove the rubbish bin if it may be mistaken for a toilet.
- Remove any items in the bathroom that are not routinely used.
- Towels of a contrasting colour to that of the bathroom walls may be easier for the person with dementia to locate/use.
- Leave toilet door open when not in use.
- Put some brightly coloured card behind the toilet roll so that it stands out.
- Put a prompt sign on the inside of the toilet door to remind the person with dementia to flush the toilet.
- Replace the toilet seat with a blue or red one so that the toilet stands out against the background.
- You can purchase on line, toilet light sensors (under \$20)

Bedroom

- Ensure there is a clear pathway with sensor lights for the person to get to the toilet at night.
- Avoid using electric blankets and hot water bottles. Consider using electric blankets with a timer control. Consider types of nightwear and bedding as alternatives to using electric blankets and hot water bottles.

- Consider having bed side lamps which work by touch sensor.
- If a person has advanced dementia consider using a baby monitoring type of device.

Outside the House

- Consider locking access to vehicles, bikes, mobility scooters, and farm machinery.
- Consider installing grab rails at the entrance to the home used by the person with dementia.
- Remove any indoor/outdoor plants which are poisonous or spikey.
- Keep paths well swept and clear of over- hanging branches.
- Check catches on gates.
- Remove or store securely hazardous substances in sheds/garages.
- Consider well placed, bright outdoor lighting in outdoor area(s) used by your family member who has dementia.
- Set up a safe, sheltered outside place for your family member to sit and enjoy the garden and being outside.

Finally, Be Kind to Yourself

- You are human. None of us are perfect-especially during these times at home.
- Take care of yourself, as well as your family member who has dementia.
- The Dementia Waikato Support Coordinators are Occupational Therapists with expertise in assessing home environments/safety. We are available to assist you with any concerns you may have re home safety and how you may be able to encourage the person with a dementia diagnosis to be as independent as possible.

Feel free to contact us at Dementia Waikato if you need to talk about any issues you are having with the person you are caring for. Dementia Waikato staff are all working from home and can speak with you on the phone 07 929 4042 or via email info@dementiawaikato.org.nz