



# MAKING A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA SAFE AT HOME

## A note from the Editor...

### **'There are many things you can do'**

A friend of mine who cared for her grandfather once said to me: 'You can't make your mother happy, but you can make her safe'. She was right. My mum has vascular dementia and when she lived at home alone, she tried to refuse any offers of help.

It's not always easy to keep a person with dementia safe when they live alone. Even if they don't live alone, it's not possible for loved ones to be with them 24 hours a day. So it's natural to worry, especially if you don't live locally. Building a support team of friends and neighbours around you is important. Don't try and do everything on your own, or you'll burn yourself out.

When you visit the person, there are a number of things you can do to make sure the person's home is the safest possible environment for them.

When my mother lived alone, I used to check

for potential hazards. I'd throw out of date food away. I would also make sure that all the light bulbs in the house were working to help prevent falls and keep her medication locked away.

There are many simple yet useful things you can do. This guide covers important aspects like reducing the risk of falls and making domestic appliances safe, as well as other general advice sourced from experts and gleaned from hands-on personal experience. Although it's virtually impossible to plan for every scenario, we hope you find it useful. I'd also highly recommend that you come along to The Alzheimer's Show in June to see products and services that can help to provide that extra peace of mind. See you there!

## Where are they now?

A person with dementia will one day require 24-hour care, but until that time comes, they may be living alone and may need only occasional help. It's worth seriously considering where they are now in their dementia journey. If they are in the early stages of their dementia, they may be able to go out for a walk on their own, live fairly independently and may just require occasional help with domestic tasks around the



house. However, as the dementia takes hold, the person's needs will gradually increase. And you may wonder if the current level of support they have is adequate. If they noticeably start to deteriorate, then be ready with a strategy to provide any additional support required.

If you use the services of a private home care agency, increasing the care package they receive is one option. You may want to increase a care worker's visits from once a day to twice a day, for instance. Maybe you feel it's best for the person with dementia to have someone present at every mealtime, when food is being prepared, so you may increase the visits to three times a day. This will certainly help to increase the likelihood of keeping the person safe, but there are also other key points to consider, as when the care worker goes home, the person will be alone and

therefore potentially more vulnerable.

When you next visit the person with dementia, take a good look around their home. Think health and safety. What can you do to make their home a safer environment straight away?

## Reducing the risk of falls

The person with dementia may have mobility problems or may be a bit unsteady on their feet.

You can contact social services or your local Alzheimer's Society office if you have one, and ask for an occupational therapist to come in to do an assessment and recommend changes or adaptations to the person's home. This could include a handrail for the stairs, a raised toilet seat, a shower stool for the bathroom so that they can sit down while they shower, or a commode for the bedroom, which means they don't have to travel far to use the toilet at night. A nightlight that you plug into a mains socket is a good idea if the person wakes regularly at night and often gets up, as it will

reduce the risk of falls.

Mobility aids like walking frames and items like shower stools can also be purchased privately online if you think the person needs them straight away.



## Remove obstacles

You can also check the house for potential obstacles that may increase the risk of a fall. Get rid of loose rugs, deal with frayed carpets and move small items of furniture such as coffee tables away from the middle of a room that the person may be more likely to bump into.

## Clear the clutter

The less cluttered the person's home environment the better. Remove patterned obstacles or ornaments to avoid confusion and give the person a clear path. Make sure they can walk from one room to another without having to navigate their way around obstacles, or perceived obstacles. Keep floors clean and free from clutter. Pick up clothes or towels from the bedroom floor and put slippers or shoes underneath chairs or in cupboards so that they don't cause trips or falls. If you are unable to visit the person daily, then ask the carer who comes in to put these items away and make sure the floors are clear before



they leave. Make sure all the lights in the house are working, so that the person is less likely to fall over in the dark.

## Disconnect portable fires

A person may not remember to turn off a portable or electric fire. It's best to disconnect them and arrange for the person's central

heating to come on automatically, at pre-set times.

## Get carers to lock up at night

Make sure the person is either capable of remembering to lock the house up at night (you could always call to remind them but make sure they do it while you're on the phone) or you may need a carer to do this. Arrange for it to be written into the care plan so that it's automatically done.



## Get the person to exercise regularly

Don't underestimate the benefits of regular exercise. Encourage the person to exercise regularly to maintain and improve their strength, reduce muscle wastage and improve balance. Each time you visit the person, get them to go for a walk with you, even if they use a walking frame, and encourage them to move around and stay as mobile as possible. The more exercise they can get, the more likely they are to remain mobile and therefore more independent for longer.

## Take them for eye tests

It's also important to make sure the person has regular eye tests, so that they can see where they are going. That said, it's important to mention that dementia can affect a person's sight, as the brain has to interpret what we see. This means that rugs can be mistaken for obstacles and patterns on rugs or mats can be viewed as being at different heights.

## Look into a pendant alarm

A pendant alarm is a device that can be worn around the person's neck or as a bracelet that enables them to call for help. It could be useful if the person has a fall and can't get up. They can

press a button on the pendant and call for help 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Admittedly, it won't work for everyone, as the person has to remember to wear it and understand that they need to press the button if they require help. However, if they have a carer who comes in to assist with washing and dressing in the morning, the carer could make sure they are wearing it before they leave. Though this doesn't guarantee the person won't take it off, it may be a solution for those who understand the concept. Speak to your local authority and see if they can provide one (though you may have to pay) or you can purchase one privately.

## Get a key safe

A key safe is an ideal item for a person with dementia or any elderly person who lives alone. It's a small box with a keypad for a PIN code that can be installed outside the house, usually in a discreet place so that it's not easily visible to strangers. My mother's key safe was on the wall at the side of her house and couldn't be viewed from the street, so only carers and family members knew it was there. It contained a spare house key accessed via a unique PIN code so that carers could let themselves in when she didn't hear the front door. It also meant that trusted neighbours could use it to let mum in on occasions when she locked herself out. Unfortunately, she wouldn't have known how to use the key safe on her own, but having family or friends nearby who could access the key safe proved invaluable on a few occasions. Speak to your local authority in the first instance, or you can purchase a key safe online.

## Lock away medication

If the person is taking medication on a daily basis, then it's best to ensure they can't access it when they are alone in case they get confused. I learned the hard way with my mother that her medication needed to be

locked away. In the early stages of her dementia, she simply needed a quick phone call from me to prompt her to take a tablet, and I would wait on the phone while she took it. As her condition deteriorated, she got more confused about the medication and one day tipped all of the tablets out of the box, then rang me and asked me which ones to take. I realised it wasn't safe for her to have access to any of her medication (including non-prescription tablets like aspirin), in case she took too many. I bought a small portable safe and hid her medication in the safe. Her carer had the key, and I had the spare key. Only the two of us could open the safe and access her tablets.



## Know when to disconnect appliances

Domestic appliances can be confusing for a person with dementia, even if they have used the same devices for many years. If you put written instructions on an appliance to remind them how to use it, the person may be able to read what you've written but may be unable to process the information.

At some stage in their illness, there is a risk that the person may leave an oven or hob on. Be sensible; judge when you feel the oven needs



to be turned off at the mains or disconnected entirely. Even if the person objects, you will reach a stage where you know what is best for them. You may not win favour with them, but you will sometimes have to make tough decisions they disagree with, that you know are the right decisions. Replacing a normal mains oven with a simple microwave or convection oven that turns itself off after use could work, but then the person may struggle to master a new device.

A better solution may be to arrange for the person with dementia to have meals on wheels (speak to social services), or arrange for a carer to come in and make them lunch and dinner.

If you think the person will struggle to use their washing machine safely, and there is a risk of a water leak, then you could make arrangements to do their washing, or arrange for someone else to come in and load the machine. If you are worried they will try to load the machine themselves, and may do it incorrectly, it would be sensible to disconnect it and wash their laundry somewhere else.

## Look into assistive technology

Assistive technology is a term given to products or the process of sourcing suitable products, designed for those with disabilities or dementia. These items are easy to use and can help make many daily activities easier. Examples include TV remote controls, phones and radios – all of which contain a minimal number of buttons.

My mother began to confuse the TV remote control with the phone, as they were roughly the same shape and size. I got rid of her old phone that had too many buttons and features she didn't need, and bought her a simple Doro

phone with numbers for dialing and volume control. She didn't need extra features that would only confuse her. It also looked more like an old fashioned telephone, so she was less likely to confuse it with the remote control. I replaced her remote control with a simple remote that had just a few buttons – how to turn the TV on and off, channels and volume. These changes may sound small, but to a person with dementia, they can make a big difference to their quality of life. My mother relied on the TV for company when she was alone, and would get distressed if she couldn't get it to work.

## Strategies to prevent wandering

If you are worried about the person with dementia wandering off and getting lost, there are various companies and services that can



install monitors in the house, including GPS navigation, to track their movements. Some companies provide alarms that sound when the person steps outside. There are a whole range of products, including wander detection alarms, door opening

alarms and bed occupancy alarms. This may sound like an invasion of privacy, and you certainly don't want the person with dementia to feel like they are a prisoner in their own home, but there may come a time when this level of support is invaluable for keeping them safe and may be the only solution if they want to stay in their own home.

Other products include a touch screen tablet that enables a person to stay in touch with family and friends through video calls. There will be various companies offering these products and services at The Alzheimer's Show. You can speak to them in person about how their products work.

## Visit the person regularly

Regular visits on your part are important, so that you can constantly monitor the wellbeing of the person and make sure they aren't struggling to do things that you could do for them, or arrange for someone else to do. It's also important to see how their needs are changing. As the dementia takes hold, they will require more and more support with all sorts of daily tasks. Being able to keep an eye on their needs will help you care for them. The more information you have about their needs, the better placed you'll be to arrange the necessary help and support required.

## More information

For more information on assistive technology products that can help keep a person with dementia safe in their own home, come along to The Alzheimer's Show and meet the suppliers of these products, so that you can ask questions and see how they can help. You can also speak to various home care agencies about a support package that would suit the person with dementia.

Visit [www.alzheimersshow.co.uk](http://www.alzheimersshow.co.uk)



## Come to The Alzheimer's Show and meet our experts in person!

The Alzheimer's Show takes place at London's Olympia on 5-6 June 2020 and brings the dementia community together under one roof, offering support, information and practical advice for families, carers and healthcare professionals. Come along and meet our team of experts, take part in practical workshops, ask Admiral Nurses for advice on coping with dementia and learn more about how you can best care for your loved ones.

TO BOOK TICKETS VISIT:  
[www.alzheimersshow.co.uk](http://www.alzheimersshow.co.uk)