



# HOME SAFETY WITH DEMENTIA

Even if your loved one is still able to manage themselves at home, you want to prepare for the future. Inside the home safety is a good starting point by looking at the living space through the eyes and mind of the loved one with dementia.

## Room by Room Home Safety

Look for areas in the home that may lead to misinterpretation or confusion in a person with dementia which ultimately can become safety hazards. One of the best places to start is the walls and flooring. Walls that are painted in neutral colors, with no bold designs or wallpaper, and those that contrast with the floor creates an area with definition, which can help with depth perception, as well as balance and coordination. Evaluate and look for:

**Clutter** may include treasures that add comfort and reminders of fond memories for the person with dementia, however, clutter may also lead to accidents. Ask yourself, if the treasured items were knocked over, would your loved one with dementia be able to maneuver around the mess on the floor, or would their lack of coordination and depth perception lead them to stumble and fall?

Is there a clear path for your loved one to walk through without the danger of bumping into extra objects or furniture?  
Is the clutter a fire hazard?

Piles of old books, newspapers, or magazines can be of interest to many of us, but in the wrong hands, and in the wrong place, it becomes a fire hazard.

If your loved one is in the early stages of dementia, consider including them in the decluttering decisions. What do you keep and what do you get rid of (or store away)? Being a part of the decluttering process minimizes confusion for the person with dementia and it promotes a therapeutic sense of independence.

**Floors** that are in good repair are integral to the coordination of a person with dementia. Uneven floors or areas with rugs may cause a person with dementia to misinterpret where the floor begins or ends, which may cause them to stumble or fall. To avoid tripping hazards, it is best to avoid the use of throw rugs at all. Always use non-skid waxes and cleaners on the flooring. Textured flooring or carpet provides more grip for the feet.

**Stairways** should be marked at both the top and the bottom with reflective tape. Ensure handrails are provided, as well as light switches at both ends. If possible, stairs should be carpeted or have grip strips.

**Smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors** should be installed near the kitchen and all sleeping areas. Batteries in each detector should be checked frequently. Ensure your loved one understands what to do if a detector does go off.

**Mirrors or glass doors** can lead to confusion or may look like an open door. Place stickers on glass doors and mirrors to ensure the glass is visible. Avoid the use of decorative mirrors on the walls.

**Lighting** should be strong but without glare. Ensure lights are arranged in a way that avoids shadowing which can lead to confusion in people with dementia. Install motion-sensing lights throughout the home which help with night safety and provide additional light on days with dim natural light.

Remember: The level of safety measures required for people with dementia depends upon the stage of dementia your loved one is in. If they are still living on their own, consider each of these measures as ways you can improve safety within their home today, and help plan safety as their dementia progresses.

## Kitchen Safety

Kitchens are one of the most dangerous rooms for people with dementia. Carefully assess each of these kitchen areas:

- Install safety knobs and automatic shut off switches on the stove. With a gas range, install a safety shut off valve that the person with dementia cannot accidentally turn on.
- Consider disconnecting the garbage disposal.
- Install drain traps to catch anything that may end up in the plumbing. Install a motion-sensing night light.
- Clear the kitchen of dangerous and toxic chemicals. Install childproof locks on cabinets that contain glass or breakable items.
- Place cleaning products, matches, knives, scissors, and small appliances under lock and key. Consider moving these objects to a designated locked storage area away from the kitchen.
- Clear out junk drawers as these lead to confusion and can be a safety hazard for the person with dementia.
- Store medications and prescriptions in a locked cabinet.

## Bathroom Safety

Persons with advanced dementia should not be left in a bathroom alone, however, steps can be taken that help with balance and coordination.

- Remove the lock from the bathroom door to prevent being locked inside.
- To prevent slipping on wet floors, consider using washable wall-to-wall carpeting.
- Try to avoid the use of throw rugs, but if you find them necessary, secure the rugs with double-sided tape.
- Place non-skid adhesive strips, decals, or non-slip mats in the tub and shower.
- Consider purchasing foam rubber faucet covers in the tub to prevent injury if your loved one should fall. Install a raised toilet seat with handrails or grab bars beside the toilet.
- Install grab bars in the tub or shower.
- Consider installing a faucet that emits both hot and cold water to avoid burns and set the water temperature at no greater than 120°F to avoid scalding.
- Install a motion-sensing night light.
- Remove all electrical devices from the bathroom.
- Remove all medications and cleaning products from the bathroom and lock them in a cabinet or designated storage area elsewhere.

## Bedroom Safety

People get out of bed during the night for various reasons—to use the bathroom, hunger, thirst, restlessness, and pain. Help your loved one with dementia safely maneuver their way out of bed:

- Consider a night light which allows enough light for safety, but not so much that it leaves shadowing effects on the walls or inhibits sleep.
- Remove the bedroom door lock to prevent being locked inside the room.
- Use a monitoring device in later stages of dementia to ensure you hear when your loved one needs assistance.
- Remove portable space heaters.
- Ensure fans cannot be knocked or tripped over, and that objects cannot be pushed into the blades.
- Avoid electric blankets and mattress covers to avoid burns, but if you do use them, ensure the person with dementia does not have access to the controls.
- If the person is prone to falling out of bed, consider placing thick mats next to the bend to cushion falls—but know that mats or rugs can lead to tripping and falling.
- Consider bed railings, or hospital beds, for people prone to falling out of bed, however, be aware of the serious and life-threatening entrapment or entanglement safety risks outlined by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

## Laundry Room

Safety in the laundry room rests on the stage of dementia your loved one is in.

If the person with dementia can operate the washer and dryer on their own, ensure the products that they use are safety and coordination friendly, such as the use of laundry detergent pods or dryer sheets. Remember, though, that people in later stages of dementia may try to eat items that come in small packages, including laundry detergent pods. Remove dangerous caustic chemicals, such as chlorine bleach, from the laundry room altogether.

If the person with dementia is living with you and unable to take care of themselves, keep the door to the laundry room locked. If this is not possible, lock all laundry products in a cabinet. Remove knobs from both the washer and dryer and ensure washer and dryer lids remain closed and latched.

## Exterior Doors and Windows

For the person with dementia who can safely take care of themselves at home, working locks need to be installed on all the exterior doors and windows. This measure is more to keep intruders out than to keep your loved one in.

For you, the caregiver who lives with a person in an advanced stage of dementia, you must take extra precaution to ensure your loved one cannot wander out of the house. Install deadbolt locks either high or low on the doors to ensure it is difficult for the person to walk out. Also, consider installing alarms that notify you when an exterior door or window has opened.

Always get in the habit of keeping an extra door key on you to ensure you're not locked out of your own home. It never hurts to keep an extra set of keys either hidden or given to a close family member or friend for easy access.

## Porches, Decks, and Patios

Several steps, or one small step, that leads from a house to an outdoor living area can be a safety hazard.

For a person with dementia, especially an elderly person, consider the installation of a ramp to eliminate the step(s) altogether. Decks are generally above ground. To prevent the person with dementia from stepping or falling over the side of the deck, install safety rails around the perimeter.

For people in late-stage dementia, consider installing a child-proof gate at the top of any ramp or steps leading down from a porch or deck.

## Garages and Storage Buildings

Garages and storage buildings are not optimal areas for people with dementia as they often contain hazardous chemicals, gasoline, motorized vehicles, and lawn equipment. Check for solid locks on both the doors and windows to prevent unsupervised entry.

People in the early stages of dementia may still be able to drive, but as time advances, the keys must be removed from your loved one. Store automobile keys in a locked box or in a secure area and don't forget to include keys to heavy machinery like riding lawn mowers.

## Outdoor Lighting

Ensure all walkways, porches, and other entry or exit areas are well-lit. Motion detecting outdoor security lighting is a great option because it does not continuously light the outdoor space, which helps to prevent the person with dementia from getting their days and nights confused.

## Yard Safety

**Fencing** may be the safety barrier that allows a person with dementia to independently leave the house and spend time outdoors. This can be therapeutic in the early stages of dementia, especially when activities, including meals, can be enjoyed in an outdoor space.

Check gates to ensure they latch well and consider installing childproof locks to ensure your loved one cannot wander away. Evaluate and look for:

- **Clutter** or low to the ground items such as garden tools, hoses, decorative fencing, or lighting fixtures can be a tripping hazard to even the most coordinated individuals.
- **Walkways** made of smooth concrete are ideal if they are not slick. Uneven stone paths can be dangerous to a person with dementia as their sense of balance diminishes. Wooden walk or decking materials are safe if they provide an even surface to walk on, but they may become slick when wet.
- **Steps** should be well-marked with fluorescent or red tape, non-slippery decals, and handrails must be installed.
- **Inclines** in yards can be difficult for many people to maneuver on foot, but this is especially dangerous for those that have dementia. Steep steps often accompany inclines in yards. To avoid a fall, ensure the person with dementia has no access to a yard that contains either steep steps or inclines.
- **Trees and greenery** may be a part of landscaping that a person with dementia loves, but they may not notice low hanging branches or offshoots. Tree branches and other greenery must be trimmed to a safe level to avoid injury to the eyes or body.

**Don't forget the garden!** People with dementia may enjoy gardening, especially if they were avid gardeners prior to their diagnosis. Schedule gardening time as you would any activity but ensure your loved one with dementia does not have unsupervised access to gardening tools or chemicals. Above ground gardens, especially those that are waist level, are easy on the back and might encourage your loved one to spend healthy time outdoors.

## Pools

Exercise is known to improve brain health, including swimming. Water aquatics is less strenuous on the joints compared to other types of exercise, and it can be calming as well.

People that were good swimmers prior to their diagnosis of dementia may find swimming especially therapeutic. Swimming may promote a sense of independence and joy as they partake in a much-loved activity.

The problem with having an unsupervised pool at a home is that people with dementia, especially as the condition advances, may lose their sense of depth, or lack coordination, and may even make a poor decision and enter the pool even if they no longer swim well. Supervision is key to pool safety with people that have dementia.

The pool must be surrounded by fencing or decking with a locked gate. If fencing is not an option, doors or windows that lead to the pool area must be locked with childproof locks and alarms. As an extra safety measure, consider installing alarmed pool sensors that detect movement or below surface disturbances.

## Basements

Basements that aren't a part of the actual living area are typically a threat to the safety of people with dementia as most have steep non-carpeted steps, contain mechanical systems, and are often used as storage areas for chemicals and other dangerous substances.

Install a childproof lock and consider alarming the door that leads to the basement. If the basement is ground level on the outside, ensure exterior doors and windows are also locked.

Consider relocating laundry equipment and other necessary day-to-day appliances from the basement to the ground floor.

If you are a caregiver and would like to talk about the best options for the future, give us a call. We can help you through every step of the way.