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## **Tips for Bathing, Grooming and Oral Care**

Bathing is often the most difficult personal care activity that caregivers face. Because it is such an intimate experience, people with Alzheimer's and other dementias may perceive it as unpleasant or intrusive.

### **Behaviors during bathing**

People with dementia may become resistant to bathing. Such behavior often occurs because the person doesn't remember what bathing is for or doesn't have the patience to endure lack of modesty, being cold or other discomforts. Loss of independence and privacy can be very difficult for the person with dementia. The disease also may increase sensitivity to water temperature or pressure.

Do not take disruptive behaviors personally. Remaining flexible, patient and calm will serve you best as you try the tips on this page.

### **Before you begin**

When bathing a person with dementia, allow the person to do as much as possible. Be ready to assist when needed but try to offer only the level of help necessary. In the earlier stages, the person may only need a reminder to bathe. As the disease progresses, he or she will require more assistance.

Prepare the bathroom in advance by:

- **Gathering bathing supplies.** Have large towels (that you can completely wrap around the person for privacy and warmth), shampoo and soap ready before you tell the person that it's time to bathe.
- **Making the room comfortable.** Pad the shower seat and other cold or uncomfortable surfaces with towels. Check that the room temperature is pleasant.
- **Placing soap, shampoo and other supplies within reach.** Try using hotel-sized plastic containers of shampoo and have a washcloth ready to cover the person's eyes to prevent stinging.
- **Monitoring water temperature.** The person may not sense when the water is dangerously hot or may resist bathing if the water is too cool. Always check the water temperature, even if the person draws his or her own bath.

### **MAKING THE BATHROOM SAFE**

It's important to make the bathroom as safe and comfortable as possible. Install grab bars, place non-skid mats on floors, use a tub bench or bath chair that can be adjusted to different heights, watch for puddles and lower the thermostat on your hot-water heater to prevent scalding injuries. Also, take care to never leave the person with dementia alone in the bathroom, use products made of non-breakable materials, and keep sharp objects (i.e. tweezers, scissors) out of reach.

### **Helping the person feel in control**

You may need to experiment to determine if the individual prefers showers or tub baths.

- **Give the person choices.** Ask: "Would you like to take a bath or a shower?" or "Do you prefer to bathe now or in 15 minutes?"
- **Fill the tub with 2 to 3 inches of water.** Then assess the person's reaction to getting in. It may be better to fill the tub after the person is seated.
- **Be sure the person has a role.** Have the person hold a washcloth or shampoo bottle.
- **Be aware that the person may perceive bathing to be threatening.** Have activities ready in case the person becomes agitated. For example, play soothing music or sing together. If the person resists bathing, distract him or her and try again later.
- **Always protect the person's dignity and privacy.** Try to help the person feel less vulnerable by covering the person with a bath blanket while undressing. Let the person hold a towel in front of his or her body, in and out of the shower or tub, to help ease anxiety.
- **Have a familiar person of the same sex help, if that is more comfortable.** Cover or remove the mirrors if a reflection leads the person to believe there's a stranger in the room.

#### Adapting the bathing process

You may experience the most difficulty when attempting to wash the person's hair. Try using a washcloth to soap and rinse hair in the sink to reduce the amount of water on the person's face.

- **Set a regular time for bathing.** If the person usually bathes in the morning, it may confuse him or her to bathe at night. Determine what time of day is best for the person with dementia. Then set a routine.
- **Be gentle.** The person's skin may be very sensitive. Avoid scrubbing. Check the spray on the shower head to make sure the water pressure isn't too intense.
- **Simplify the bathing process.** Try different approaches to make bathing easier. For example, sew pockets into washcloths to help the person hold on to the soap, or use soap that washes both hair and body.
- **Coach the person through each step.** For example: "Put your feet in the tub." "Sit down." "Here is the soap." "Wash your arm."
- **Use other cues to remind the person what to do.** Try using a "watch me" technique or lead by example. Put your hand over the person's hand, gently guiding the washing actions.
- **Use a tub bench or bath chair.** Having the person sit while showering may be easier and safer. Look for a chair that can be adjusted to different heights.
- **Be sure to cleanse hard-to-reach areas.** Wash between folds of skin and under the breasts. It is important that genital areas are cleansed, especially if incontinence is a problem.
- **Sponge bathe as an alternative.** Don't worry about the frequency of bathing. Sponge baths with a washcloth can be effective between showers. You may want to try non-rinse soap products, which can be used with warm towels and applied under the guise of providing a "massage."

#### After-bath care

- Check for rashes and sores, especially if the person is incontinent or unable to move around.
- Seat the person while drying off skin and putting on fresh clothes.

- Be gentle on the skin. Pat skin dry instead of rubbing. Apply lotion to keep skin soft.
- Use cornstarch or talcum powder under the breasts and in the creases and folds of skin.

## Dressing and Grooming

Helping a person with dementia maintain his or her appearance can promote positive self-esteem. While these tasks may become frustrating for a person with Alzheimer's in the later stages of the disease, the tips below can help simplify the process.

### Dressing

Plan plenty of time when dressing or grooming someone with Alzheimer's. Rushing the person can cause anxiety and frustration. As the disease progresses beyond the early stages, choosing and putting on clothes can be frustrating for the person with dementia. The person may not remember how to dress or may be overwhelmed with the choices or the task itself.

To assist:

- **Simplify choices.** Keep the closets free of excess clothing. A person may panic if clothing choices become overwhelming. If appropriate, give the person an opportunity to select favorite outfits or colors, but try offering just two choices.
- **Organize the process.** Lay out clothing in the order that each item should be put on. Hand the person one item at a time while giving simple, direct instructions such as "Put your arms in the sleeves," rather than "Get dressed."
- **Pick comfortable and simple clothing.** Cardigans, shirts and blouses that button in front are easier to work than pullover tops. Substitute Velcro® for buttons, snaps or zippers, which may be too difficult to handle. Make sure that clothing is loose fitting, especially at the waist and hips, and choose fabrics that are soft and stretchable.
- **Choose comfortable shoes.** Make sure the person has comfortable, non-slip shoes.
- **Be flexible.** If the individual wants to wear the same outfit repeatedly, buy duplicates or have similar options available. Even if the person's outfit is mismatched, try to focus on the fact that he or she was able to get dressed. Keep in mind that it is important for the individual to maintain good personal hygiene, including wearing clean undergarments, as poor hygiene may lead to urinary tract or other infections that further complicate care.

It's all right if the person wants to wear several layers of clothing, just make sure he or she doesn't get overheated. When outdoors, make sure the person is dressed for the weather.

### Grooming

A person with dementia may forget how to comb hair, clip fingernails or shave. He or she may forget what the purpose is for items like nail clippers or a comb.

To assist:

- **Continue grooming routines.** If the person has always gone to the beauty shop or a barber, continue this activity. If the experience becomes distressing, it may be possible to have the barber or hairstylist come to the person's home.
- **Use favorite toiletries.** Allow the person to continue using his or her favorite toothpaste, shaving cream, cologne or makeup.
- **Perform tasks alongside the person.** Comb your hair and encourage the person to copy your motions.

- **Use safer, simpler grooming tools.** Cardboard nail files and electric shavers can be less threatening than clippers and razors.

## Dental Care

As Alzheimer's progresses, the person with dementia may forget how to brush his or her teeth or forget why it's important. As a caregiver, you may have to assist or take a more hands-on approach. Proper oral care is necessary to prevent eating difficulties, digestive problems and infections.

### Daily oral care

In the early stages of Alzheimer's, dental care focuses on prevention. Getting check-ups and cleaning and flossing teeth regularly can prevent the need for extensive procedures later, when the person with dementia may be less able to tolerate them.

During the middle and late stages of Alzheimer's, oral health may become more challenging. The person may forget what to do with toothpaste or how to rinse or may be resistant to assistance from others.

Loss of appetite may be a sign of mouth pain or ill fitting-dentures.

### Try these tips:

- **Provide short, simple instructions.** Explain dental care by breaking directions into steps. "Brush your teeth" by itself may be too vague. Instead, walk the person through the process. Say: "Hold your toothbrush." "Put paste on the brush." Then, "Brush your teeth."
- **Use a "watch me" technique.** Hold a toothbrush and show the person how to brush his or her teeth. Or, put your hand over the person's hand, gently guiding the brush. If the person seems agitated or uncooperative, postpone brushing until later in the day.
- **Keep the teeth and mouth clean.** Very gently brush the person's teeth, gums, tongue and roof of the mouth at least twice a day, with the last brushing after the evening meal and any nighttime liquid medication. Allow plenty of time and find a comfortable position if you must do the brushing yourself. Gently place the toothbrush in the person's mouth at a 45 degree angle so you massage gum tissue as you clean the teeth.

If the person wears dentures, rinse them with plain water after meals and brush them daily to remove food particles. Each night, remove them and soak in a cleanser or mouthwash. Then, use a soft toothbrush or moistened gauze pad to clean the gums, tongue and other soft mouth tissues.

- **Try different types of toothbrushes.** You may find that a soft bristled children's toothbrush works better than a hard bristled adult's brush. Or that a long handled or angled brush is easier to use than a standard toothbrush. Experiment until you find the best choice. Be aware that electric dental appliances may confuse a person with Alzheimer's.
- **Floss regularly.** Most dentists recommend flossing daily. If using floss is distressing to the person with Alzheimer's, try using a "proxabrush" to clean between teeth instead.
- **Be aware of potential mouth pain.** Investigate any signs of mouth discomfort during mealtime. Refusing to eat or strained facial expressions while eating may indicate mouth pain or dentures that don't fit properly.

### Working with the dentist

- **Find the right dentist.** Contact your local dental society to find the names of professionals who have experience working with people with dementia or with elderly patients.
- **Coordinate care.** Provide the dentist with a list of all health care providers who are caring for the person with dementia, as well as a list of all medications. Certain medications can contribute to dry mouth and other oral health issues.

- **Keep up with regular dental visits for as long as possible.** This will help prevent tooth decay, gum problems, pain and infection.