

Health, wellbeing and lifestyle

This Help Sheet discusses health and lifestyle choices for people with a diagnosis of younger onset dementia and their families and carers

Fatigue, stress or physical illness can affect everyone's ability to think and act as usual. People with younger onset dementia may be particularly susceptible to such factors because their thinking abilities are already likely to be affected by their dementia. These factors may be more easily managed or in some cases avoided with lifestyle adjustments.

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle

Managing fatigue

Fatigue impacts on a person's ability to focus on tasks and maintain attention over time. This in turn has an impact on memory and behaviour. Fatigue can also have an impact on completing tasks by reducing reaction time, attention and coordination. In some circumstances, the impact of fatigue could be dangerous, such as when driving or operating machinery. Encourage the person with dementia to:

- Establish a simpler daily routine which may help to eliminate or lessen the impact of stress or fatigue.
- Encourage the person to get adequate sleep and take regular breaks throughout the day.
- Try to complete important tasks at the time of day when the person is generally most alert and least fatigued. Often this is in the morning.

Maintaining appropriate nutrition and hydration

A poor diet can affect energy levels, physical health as well as attention and memory. Younger onset dementia can also interfere with a person's sensation of hunger or thirst, or it may affect their ability to say when they're hungry or thirsty.

- It is important to eat a balanced diet, with a variety of fruits and vegetables.
- Try to eat at set regular intervals, every day.
- Seek advice from a professional such as a nutritionist or dietician to see if particular dietary plans or supplements are recommended. This is especially important if the person with younger onset dementia has other health conditions such as diabetes.

- Periodic checks for vitamin and mineral levels (such as B12) should be done as certain deficiencies can specifically affect brain functioning.
- It is essential to drink sufficient water throughout the day to avoid dehydration. Dehydration can cause fatigue and affect performance. Dehydration can also lead to a reversible condition called delirium. If delirium is suspected, seek prompt medical advice.

Managing pain

Pain, whether acute or chronic, makes it hard for anyone to pay attention and concentrate, and pain can be particularly distressing for people with younger onset dementia, who may be less able to express their pain and receive appropriate treatment. For people with younger onset dementia, the onset, type or location of pain may be difficult to communicate and may lead to increased irritability, frustration or behavioural problems.

- Be alert to changes in routine or behaviour. Agitated behaviour or reluctance to move may be a sign of pain.
- Seek medical assessment and advice regarding any obvious or on-going pain.
- Have pain medications regularly reviewed by a GP or pharmacist.
- In many cases relaxation techniques or physical therapies such as massage may help to reduce pain (such as headaches, or muscular pain).

Monitoring alcohol intake

- Alcohol, even in moderate quantities, can affect mental performance. Limiting alcohol consumption and avoiding excess consumption is very important for a person with younger onset dementia. Family, friends and colleagues can all play a role in helping a person with younger onset dementia to do so.
- Alcohol can also lower mood and is best avoided if someone is already suffering from depression.
- Alcohol can interact with a lot of medications. Seek medical advice or talk to a pharmacist about the effects of alcohol and medications.

National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500

dementia.org.au