

Going to hospital

This help sheet provides information about how to support someone with dementia who is going into hospital. It offers strategies to make their admission, hospital stay and return home easier, both for them and you.

Note

The aim of this information is to help make a hospital stay more comfortable for a person with dementia. Comfort and peace of mind are essential for both physical and mental wellbeing.

Some strategies provided here may seem excessive, dishonest or overprotective and you might feel uncomfortable carrying them out. However, talking about a hospital visit can cause stress if the person living with dementia cannot fully comprehend the facts.

Introduction

There may be times when someone you care for needs to go to hospital. A hospital admission can be stressful for someone living with dementia due to:

- a change of routine
- spending time in an unfamiliar environment
- the interruptions to daily routines and activities
- a noisy environment
- having unfamiliar people caring for them
- their regular family member or carer not being able to stay with them all the time.

Going to hospital may also cause changes in the person's behaviour.

Telling a person with dementia about going to hospital

For many people, it will be best to talk about going to hospital and involve the person in all the planning.

Deciding whether to tell the person in advance will depend on various factors, such as:

- the extent of their memory loss
- anticipated anxiety about going to hospital
- the possibility of wanting to go to hospital as soon as they are given an appointment time.

If it is likely the person might want to go to hospital immediately or ask repeatedly about going to hospital, you may decide not to tell them beforehand.

If you do not tell the person in advance, some useful approaches could be to:

- Consider telling them just before you go.
- Talk about a hospital visit in a calm and gentle way, to set the tone for their reaction.
- Be prepared to leave within a few hours of telling them.

Packing for hospital

As a family member or carer, you will generally know the best approach to prepare for a hospital stay.

Possible approaches:

- Consider involving the person in preparing and packing. But even if they have participated in their packing, do not assume that they understand everything to do with their hospital visit.
- Suggest what to take and let the person confirm your choice.
- For some people, it may be best to avoid any mention of preparing for hospital. Pack what the person will need, without involving them.

Things to consider:

- Choose familiar clothes from their wardrobe and try to avoid buying new garments.
- If new items need to be bought, try to allow time for the person to get familiar with them before admission.
- If you need multiples of an item, make them all the same.
- Label all belongings clearly.
- Leave valuables at home.

Unplanned admissions

In the event of a medical emergency, it can be useful to have a bag packed for an unplanned admission. You could include:

- a list of current medications, with dosages
- some familiar clothes and toiletries
- general information about the person
- emergency numbers.

Review the packed bag regularly to ensure its contents are up to date.

Arrival at the hospital

Plan your trip:

- Try to arrange admission during a quiet time at the hospital.
- If possible, have someone go with you to help.
- Plan where you will park.
- Know how to get to admissions from where you park or are dropped off.
- If possible, always let hospital staff know in advance that the person is living with dementia, so they can provide appropriate care.

Provide details about the person, in writing, so it is on file for all staff.

These details could include:

- the person's preferred name
- their regular routine
- likes and dislikes
- possible causes of agitation, and management strategies
- advice about settling the person at night
- their preferred hygiene procedures
- toileting advice.

Medications:

- Take all medications with you, including alternative and herbal remedies.
- Write down the names of all medications and dosages to have on file.
- Tell staff if the person has any preferred ways of taking medications.

Consider taking several familiar objects such as:

- family photos
- a pillow
- slippers.

A clock or calendar from home, or a simple statement of where they are, may assist with orientation and reduce confusion.

You could consider preparing a 'carer book' to take to hospital, outlining information about the person's history, friends, family and interests. This could be something for carers and visitors to use to help with engagement and communication. You can start your own personal book here: discrimination.dementia.org.au/create-carer-book/

Introducing the person to the ward

Try to accompany the person with dementia to the ward. Introduce their nurse to them as a safe person who they can talk to or ask for help.

Explain to ward staff that the person has dementia and describe their symptoms.

It is also important for you to introduce yourself to staff. Having you as a main contact person helps clarify required information and outline the needs of the person with dementia. Ask if doctors' visits can be made when you are present or request the doctor provide notes of their visit.

Leaving the person at the hospital

Tell the nursing staff when you are planning to leave, so they can take over and reduce the risk of the person with dementia feeling stressed or left without support.

You may have previous experience of what will work best when it is time for you to go.

To reduce stress, you might make an excuse to temporarily leave the person's bedside, or you could try leaving at mealtimes, because eating may offer a distraction to your departure.

Coming back to visit

When you return, the person may be annoyed or angry. If this happens, empathise with them, then focus on something more pleasing. Use quiet, soothing language and positive conversation.

Things to try:

- If the person is well enough, take in an activity to do together, or one that is familiar that they may enjoy. You might take in a magazine or newspaper, photographs, music or a quiz.
- Maintain physical contact with the person through touch, especially if the person is feeling unsure or afraid. It is important that the person feels close to their visitors. It can be good to give the person a hand massage. If patients and visitors are used to holding hands or kissing, this should continue in hospital. Some visitors can be unsure about touching for fear of hurting the patient or of dislodging medical equipment. Staff can advise how to continue physical contact if medical equipment is making this difficult.
- Keep a sheet of paper by the bed where visitors can record their names, so that the person with dementia can reassure themselves that they have had visitors.

Wanting to go home prematurely

If someone with dementia is asking to come home, it's important that you don't blame hospital staff for them being admitted. The person needs to have confidence in the hospital staff for their care and treatment.

It may help for you to pretend to be annoyed that the stay is so long, but point out that it is an opportunity to be positively spoilt. Emphasise that the hospital is looking after them extremely well.

Discharge

Tips to consider:

- It may be best to avoid telling someone with dementia in advance about their discharge, because they may want to leave immediately. Instead, tell them at the time they are being discharged, so they can leave straight away.
- Ask staff to put in writing anything that you need to know.
- Keep in touch with the person's regular doctor so the person can see someone familiar and be reassured about any part of the treatment.

After discharge

Things to consider:

- Avoid stopping on the way home for any reason.
- Consider that hospital may have been an overwhelming and stimulating experience.
- Allow the person with dementia to re-establish themselves in their home environment with as little interruption as possible.
- The person may be tired because of being unwell.
- Be ready to spend some quiet time together, engaging the person with dementia in an activity that interests them, such as music or photos.

Based on B. Mason CNC, J. Hales social worker and the nursing consortium of Central Coast Health, New South Wales: When someone in your care has memory loss and needs to go to hospital.

Support for the carer

Admitting someone to hospital can be hard. Take time to connect with how you are feeling and think about what you might need. You might make a call to a friend or take some time to relax.

It is important to look after your health and wellbeing and turn to others for support when you need it. For advice and carer support you could call:

National Dementia Helpline: **1800 100 500**

Carer Gateway: **1800 422 737**

Additional reading and resources

- Dementia Australia support
Visit: dementia.org.au/support
- Dementia Australia library service
Visit: dementia.org.au/library

Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500

For language assistance: 131 450

Visit our website: dementia.org.au