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Alzheimer's Caregiving: Bathing, Dressing, and Grooming

[Español](#)

The ability to perform daily tasks, such as bathing, dressing, and eating, changes when a person has [Alzheimer's disease](#). During the earlier stages of the disease, they may remain relatively independent, but there will come a point when they need more help with daily activities. For a caregiver, the main goal is to find the balance of letting the person be as independent as possible while providing support when needed. Considering what the person with dementia needs to be successful can be a step toward achieving that balance.

Some of the activities people will need help with, such as bathing and getting dressed, are routines they likely did in private in the past. Your loved one may feel embarrassed and not want help. They also may feel angry about not being able to care for themselves. Try to have patience and consider ways to make the experience more positive for both of you.

How to help someone who has Alzheimer's with bathing

Helping someone with Alzheimer's take a bath or shower can be one of the hardest things you do as a caregiver. A person with this disease might regard bathing as scary, embarrassing, or physically unpleasant, and may communicate their discomfort by verbally or physically resisting attempts to help them bathe.



Planning can help make the experience better for both of you. Use the following tips to help keep your loved one safe and comfortable while bathing.

Before a bath or shower

- Gather supplies. Get soap, washcloths, towels, shampoo, and a bath chair ready. You can also use a rubber bathmat and safety bars to prevent falls. Do not use bath oils or anything else that could make the tub slippery. If you need additional supplies for yourself, such as gloves, gather those as well.
- Make the bathroom inviting by keeping the room warm and not too dark. Play soft music if it helps to relax the person. Ensure the water temperature in the bath or shower is comfortable.
- Be matter-of-fact about bathing. Say, "It's time for a bath now." If the person doesn't respond, try giving them a choice. For example, ask: "Do you want to bathe now or in 15 minutes?" or "Do you want to take a bath or a shower?"
- Try to schedule bathing at the same time each day.

During a bath or shower

- Allow the person with Alzheimer's to have a role in the bathing process. Even if they are unable to wash their body, they could hold the washcloth, sponge, or shampoo bottle.
- If the person can wash their own body, tell them what to do, step by step. Use phrases like "put your feet in the tub," "sit down," "take the soap," or "wash your stomach." You can demonstrate each action or guide the person's hand with your own.
- If you are bathing the person, use a handheld showerhead. Be gentle and tell the person each step you are going to do before you do it. Begin by washing hands or feet. These areas are less threatening and can help relax the person before moving to the face, torso, or head.
- Put a towel over the person's shoulders or lap to help them feel less exposed. Then use a sponge or washcloth to clean under the towel.
- Distract the person by talking about something else if they become upset.
- Never leave a person with Alzheimer's alone in the tub or shower.

After a bath or shower

- Pat the person's [skin](#) dry with a towel. Be sure to dry between folds of skin and check for rashes. If you find a rash, try using a moisturizing ointment or cream. See a doctor if the rash doesn't seem to improve.
- If the person has trouble with [incontinence](#), use a protective ointment, such as petroleum jelly, around the rectum, vagina, or penis. To avoid making the person with Alzheimer's uncomfortable, ask them if they would like to do this for themselves if they're able.
- Use lotion to keep skin soft and powder and ointments to prevent chafing, as needed.

Try to give the person a bath or shower two or three times a week but be open to a more flexible schedule. If a bath or shower is too upsetting, consider a sponge bath to clean the face, hands, feet, underarms, and private areas on days when a full bath or shower isn't possible. Sometimes washing a person who is sitting in a chair can be a more pleasant experience. If shampooing is challenging, try washing the person's hair in the sink, using a hose attachment.

For tips on how to make a bathroom safer for someone with Alzheimer's, use the [Home Safety Checklist for Alzheimer's Disease](#).

If bathing becomes too hard for you to do on your own, there are [ways you can get help](#).

How to help someone with Alzheimer's get dressed

People with Alzheimer's often need more time to dress. It can be hard for them to choose their clothes, and they might wear the wrong clothing for the season. They might also wear colors that don't go together or forget to put on a piece of clothing. Allow the person to dress on their own for as long as possible.

Try these tips to make dressing easier:

- Lay out clothes in the order the person should put them on, such as underwear first, then pants, then a shirt, and then a sweater.
- Hand the person one thing at a time or give step-by-step dressing instructions.
- Keep only one or two outfits in the closet or dresser at a time to reduce the number of choices.
- Buy three or four sets of the same clothes if the person wants to wear the same clothing every day.
- Buy loose-fitting, comfortable clothing. Short cotton socks and loose cotton underwear are best. Sweatpants and shorts with elastic waistbands are helpful.
- Use fasteners or large zipper pulls for clothing, instead of buttons or buckles. Try slip-on shoes that won't slide off or shoes with hook-and-loop fastener straps instead of shoelaces.

How to help someone with Alzheimer's with their grooming

For the most part, when people feel good about how they look, they feel better. Helping people with Alzheimer's with their grooming, such as makeup, hair, nails, and mouth care, can help them feel more like themselves. The following tips can help with grooming.

Makeup and hair

- Encourage the person to wear makeup if they have always worn it. If needed, you can offer to apply makeup and face care products.
- Help them shave as needed if they did this in the past. Use an electric razor for safety. Make sure people with longer facial hair trim it regularly to keep it healthy and make it easier to care for.
- Take the person to get their hair trimmed and styled. Some barbers or hairstylists may come to your home.
- Keep the person's nails clean and trimmed. Consider using a nail file if you or your loved ones aren't comfortable using clippers.

Tooth brushing and mouth care

- Show the person how to brush their teeth. Go step by step. For example, you can say: pick up the toothpaste, take the cap off, put the toothpaste on the toothbrush, and then brush. Remember to let the person do as much as possible.
- Try a long-handled, angled, or electric toothbrush if you need to brush the person's teeth for them.
- If the person bites down on the toothbrush or does not want something in their mouth, sometimes using a child's size toothbrush can be helpful.
- Use special tools to make flossing easier, such as floss holders, floss threaders, oral irrigators, and interdental brushes.
- If the person has dentures, help them keep them clean. Make sure the person uses the denture cleaning material the right way.
- Ask the person to rinse their mouth with water after each meal and use mouthwash once a day.
- Be aware of dry mouth. Some conditions and medications make the mouth feel dry, making it hard to chew, swallow, and talk. If the person you care for has dry mouth, a dentist can help determine the cause. You can also encourage the person to sip water often, avoid caffeine and alcohol, chew sugarless gum, and use a humidifier at night.

Good mouth care helps [prevent dental problems](#) such as cavities and gum disease. Take the person to see a dentist regularly. Ask around to find a dentist with experience treating people with Alzheimer's. Be sure to follow the dentist's advice about how often to make an appointment. Consider mobile dentistry, in which patients are treated by trained professionals in comfortable, familiar surroundings.

You may also be interested in

- Watching a video on [tips to help manage behavior changes in Alzheimer's](#)
- Exploring ways to [take care of yourself as a caregiver](#)
- Viewing an infographic of [tips to make mealtimes easier for people with Alzheimer's](#)

For more information

NIA Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

800-438-4380

adear@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers

The NIA ADEAR Center offers information and free print publications about Alzheimer's and related dementias for

families, caregivers, and health professionals. ADEAR Center staff answer telephone, email, and written requests and make referrals to local and national resources.

Alzheimers.gov

www.alzheimers.gov

Explore the Alzheimers.gov website for information and resources on Alzheimer's and related dementias from across the federal government.

Eldercare Locator

800-677-1116

eldercarelocator@USAgings.org

<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

Alzheimer's Association

800-272-3900

866-403-3073 (TTY)

info@alz.org

www.alz.org

Alzheimer's Foundation of America

866-232-8484

info@alzfdn.org

<https://alzfdn.org>

Family Caregiver Alliance

800-445-8106

info@caregiver.org

www.caregiver.org

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