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Taking a Person With Alzheimer's Disease to the Hospital

A trip to the hospital can be stressful for a person with [Alzheimer's disease](#) or a [related dementia](#) and their caregivers. Being prepared for emergency and planned hospital visits can relieve some of that stress. This article suggests ways to help you prepare and tips for making your visit to the emergency room or hospital easier.

Going to the emergency room

These tips can help to reduce the stress and confusion that comes with an unplanned trip to the emergency room (ER) for people with dementia and their caregivers:

- In case you need to leave your home quickly, keep a bag packed for the person with dementia that has a [list of their medicines](#), insurance cards, contact information for their health care providers, and any [advance directives](#).
- If you can, ask a friend or family member to go with you or meet you in the ER. They can stay with the person with dementia while you complete forms and respond to medical staff's questions.
- Be ready to explain the symptoms and events leading up to the ER visit. You may need to repeat this more than once to different staff members.
- Tell ER staff that the person has [dementia](#). Explain how to best talk with the person.
- If the person with dementia must stay overnight in the hospital, try to have a friend or family member stay with them. Talk with the staff about other options for support overnight.



Pain alert

People who have dementia may [not be able to tell you](#) when they're in pain. Instead, the person's face may show signs of being in pain or feeling ill. Take note of sudden changes in

behavior, such as increased yelling or striking out, which may indicate the person is uncomfortable.

Other things to note that may indicate the person is in pain are:

- Frequently changing position or having [trouble sleeping](#)
- Sudden changes in behavior, such as increased [agitation](#), crying, moaning, or grimacing
- Refusing to eat, which may be a sign that they have [tooth pain or other oral health issues](#)
- Labored breathing

If you are unsure what to do or are unable to console your loved one, call a doctor for help. Ask the person's health care team for a pain evaluation and a treatment plan to help manage their pain.

Learn more about managing [pain in older adults](#).

Before a planned hospital stay

It is common for people living with dementia to be hospitalized at some point during the course of their illness. Preparing in advance for a hospital stay can help to ease the burden for both the person with Alzheimer's and their caregivers.

Here are some tips:

- Talk to the person after their diagnosis about what they expect from trips to the hospital as their disease gets worse. Ask them about the [type of care they'd like to receive](#) and talk about situations in which the person may prefer hospice care at home rather than going to the hospital.
- Assemble a [list of important information for the person with dementia, including all of their medicines](#), insurance cards, and any [advance directives](#). You may also consider packing personal security items such as comforting pictures or spiritual objects to take to the hospital.
- [Build a care team](#) of family, friends, and/or professional caregivers to support the person during the hospital stay.
- Ask the doctor whether it's possible to shorten the hospital stay. This may include asking whether any procedures can be done in an outpatient visit and whether any tests can be run prior to hospital admission.

- Ask for a private room, with a reclining chair or bed, if insurance will cover it. It will be calmer than a shared room.
- Do not talk about the hospital stay in front of the person as if they are not there. This can be upsetting and embarrassing.
- When it is time to go to the hospital, tell the person with dementia not long before leaving home that they are going to spend a short time in the hospital, and mention which friends and family members will be there with them.

During a hospital stay

With the change in their environment and daily routines, staying in the hospital can be an uncomfortable experience for people with dementia and their caregivers.

Here are some tips to help improve the hospital experience for people with dementia and their caregivers. While the tips provide general guidance, patients and loved ones should continue to follow instructions from hospital staff:

- Have a family member, trusted friend, or hired caregiver stay with the person with dementia as much as possible. Ask whoever is staying at the hospital with the person to keep other family members informed.
- Communicate with the person to help them understand each step of their medical care.
- Expect that the person may have difficulty with certain tasks, such as finding the bathroom, using a call button, and adjusting the hospital bed.
- Help the person eat and drink. Older adults may become undernourished during a hospital stay. Help the person stay nourished by filling out menu requests, opening food containers, helping them eat, eating meals with them, and reminding them to drink fluids.
- Encourage the person with dementia to get up and move around as much as they can, safety permitting. Long periods of bed rest during a hospital stay may reduce muscle strength and increase risk of falls.
- Schedule breaks for yourself.

Additionally, not all hospital staff may have the same level of knowledge about memory loss and dementia. Since dementia affects every person differently, you may need to explain to hospital staff what approach works best with the person with dementia, what distresses or upsets them, and ways to reduce this distress.

Try these tips to work effectively with hospital staff:

- Provide staff with a personal information sheet that includes the person's normal routine, how they prefer to be addressed, likes and dislikes, possible behaviors (what might trigger them and how best to respond), and nonverbal signs of pain or discomfort.
- Place a copy of the personal information sheet with the chart in the hospital room and at the nurse's station.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions if you do not understand certain hospital procedures and tests or if you have any concerns.
- Help hospital staff understand the person's usual functioning and behavior. This can help them differentiate between dementia symptoms and signs of a more serious problem like delirium — a state of extreme confusion and disorientation.
- Tell the doctor immediately if the person seems suddenly worse or different. Medical problems such as fever, infection, medication side effects, and dehydration can cause delirium.
- To help the person stay safe, tell the staff about any previous issues with wandering, getting lost, falls, and/or delusional behavior.
- Work with the hospital staff to decide who will help with which everyday care tasks for the person with dementia (e.g., bathing, eating, or using the bathroom).

- Plan early for discharge. Ask the hospital discharge planner about eligibility for home health services, equipment, or other [long-term care options](#). Prepare for an increased level of caregiving once you get back home.
- Realize that hospital staff are providing care for many people. Speak with them calmly and patiently.

For more information on dealing with dementia and hospitalization, see the University of California, San Francisco Memory and Aging Center's [Tips for Hospitalization](#).

Managing agitation in the hospital

Recognize that an unfamiliar place, new medicines, invasive tests, and surgery may make a person with dementia confused, anxious, or agitated.

The health care team may have suggestions for helping the person with dementia be as calm and comfortable as possible. You can also try these tips to help manage agitation in the hospital:

- Remove personal clothes from sight. They may remind the person of getting dressed and going home.
- Post written reminders or cues, like a sign labeling the bathroom door, to increase the person's comfort with the new environment.
- Turn off the television, phone volume, and intercom to minimize background noise and prevent overstimulation.
- Listen to soothing music or try comforting rituals, such as reading, praying, singing, or looking through old pictures.
- Talk in a calm voice and offer reassurance. Repeat answers to questions or rephrase them if the person doesn't understand something at first. Do not rush the person.
- Provide a comforting touch or distract the person with offers of snacks and drinks if the health care team says it's okay.

- Avoid talking about subjects or events that may upset the person.

Learn more about [managing agitation and aggression in Alzheimer's](#)

You may also be interested in

- Reading more about [advance care planning](#)
- Learning about [common medical problems that occur with Alzheimer's](#)
- Finding [resources for getting help with Alzheimer's caregiving](#)

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@USAging.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>

This content is provided by the NIH National Institute on Aging (NIA). NIA scientists and other experts review this content to ensure it is accurate and up to date.

Content reviewed: July 8, 2024

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