

Overcoming Obstacles to Exercise

We know exercise is important for everyone, and people living with dementia are no exception. There is evidence that physical activity can help prevent falls and improve strength for those with dementia, but it may also be more difficult for them to exercise. Below are some common barriers to activity and examples on how to address them.

Barriers

1. **Apathy:** a lack of interest, enthusiasm, or initiative. Your loved one is not being lazy on purpose—apathy is one of the most frequently occurring symptoms of dementia.
2. **Memory:** inability to recall new information. Just like your family member may not remember to take medications, s/he may not remember the exercises the physical therapist taught or how to do them.
3. **Safety:** having appropriate boundaries inside and/or outside the home. Though walking is important, as family members we worry about our loved one wandering or falling while attempting to get exercise.

What you can do about it

1. **Adjust your expectations.** Be patient. Do not wait for your family member to ask to do an activity.
2. **Create opportunities.** Suggest an activity and give limited choices. Ask where your loved one would like to go for a walk (to the store or the park), not if s/he would like to walk.
3. **Keep it simple.** Walking or other practical tasks can be easier and more intuitive than specific new exercises. Playing games, like a beanbag toss, can also be more fun than just exercising.
4. **Do it together or use a video.** If your family member is interested in exercise, being guided by a caregiver or a video can be helpful as long as s/he can follow them safely. The “Sit and Be Fit” video series can be useful but can also get a little complicated. When in doubt, remember #3—keep it simple!
5. **If you are concerned about safety with walking, ask your physician for a physical therapy consultation.** If an assistive device is needed, it is better to get in the habit of using it sooner rather than later. Your loved one may still need to be reminded to use it, but a walker or grab bar is often a welcome assistance tool.