

# Exercise and physical activity

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Leading a physically active lifestyle can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of people with dementia. Exercise is beneficial for physical and mental health and may improve the quality of life for people in all stages of the condition. Physical activities are sometimes defined as those activities that increase your heart rate and cause you to breathe more deeply. This includes everyday activities such as walking, gardening or dancing, as well as sports and exercises with the specific aim of improving fitness. This factsheet explains why being physically active is important for people with dementia. It gives examples of suitable exercises and physical activities for people in different stages of the condition and suggests how much activity is appropriate.

## Benefits of exercise and physical activity

Exercise and physical activity may bring many benefits for people with dementia. These include:

- improving the health of the heart and blood vessels, which can reduce the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease
- reducing the risk of some types of cancer (particularly breast and colon cancer), stroke and type 2 diabetes
- improving physical fitness – maintaining strong muscles and flexible joints can help people maintain independence for longer
- improving the ability to dress, clean, cook and perform other daily activities (as these may be performed more effectively if someone is fitter or more supple)

- helping to keep bones strong and reducing the risk of osteoporosis (a disease that affects the bones, making them weak and more likely to break)
- improving cognition – recent studies have shown that exercise may improve memory and slow down mental decline
- improving sleep
- providing opportunities for social interaction and reducing the feeling of isolation
- reducing the risk of falls by improving strength and balance
- improving confidence
- increasing self-esteem
- improving mood.

## Getting started

It is important to consider the age, abilities and type of dementia someone has, as well as their needs and preferences, when they undertake physical exercise. Some people with dementia will have participated in regular exercise over the years and the idea will not be new to them, while others might have exercised very little. Younger people with dementia may be able to undertake a greater amount of physical activity.

People who have not taken part in any regular exercise for some time, or those with certain health issues, should consider seeking medical advice. Talk to a GP, physiotherapist or relevant healthcare professional before starting any new exercise or physical activity if the person has any of the following conditions:

- heart problems
- high blood pressure
- unexplained chest pain
- dizziness or fainting

- bone or joint problems (that exercise may make worse)
- breathing problems
- balance problems
- frequent falls.

These health conditions might not stop someone from participating in exercise. In fact, many of these conditions may be improved by exercise, but medical advice is recommended.

It is important to choose activities that are suitable for the person and that they find enjoyable. Exercise can be done individually, with one-to-one supervision or in a small group. Some people may like to try a few different activities to see what suits them best.

## **Exercise in the early to middle stages of dementia**

There are many suitable exercise opportunities that may be beneficial for people in the early or middle-stages of dementia. Local community or sports centres often provide a range of organised exercise and physical activity sessions, such as ball games, seated exercises, tai chi, music and dance, indoor bowls or swimming. You may be able to use a personal budget, in the form of a direct payment from your local authority to pay for these. Some of these activities can be modified and carried out at home. Walking, gardening and housework are also good forms of everyday physical activity.

People in the early stages of dementia may experience no new difficulties in sports and other physical activities they enjoy. They ought to be encouraged to continue these activities where possible.

### **What is the right amount of activity in the early to middle stages of dementia?**

There is no definitive answer to this question and the right amount of exercise will vary from person to person. The Department of Health recommends 150 minutes of moderately strenuous physical

activity per week. This equates to 30 minutes of activity per day, for at least five days a week. This can be broken up into shorter sessions throughout the day, with each session lasting a minimum of 10 minutes. For example, it could be a 15-minute walk to the local shops, and then housework or gardening tasks in the afternoon.

Below are some examples of the types of exercise that a person may perform. This is by no means an exhaustive list – any form of exercise can bring benefits.

## **Gardening**

Gardening is a physical activity that provides an opportunity to get outdoors and is enjoyed by many people. The activity level can be varied to suit someone's abilities. It could be something that requires less exertion like weeding or pruning, or a more strenuous activity like raking or mowing grass. These activities may help strengthen the body's muscles and improve breathing. Gardening can be an enjoyable activity for people at all stages of dementia.

## **Indoor bowls/skittles**

Some people may retain their bowling skills or continue to participate in other ball games, and so may enjoy indoor carpet bowls or skittles. Some local leisure centres offer indoor bowls sessions, or sets can be purchased from toy or sports stores.

## **Dance**

Dancing can range from tea dances and couple or group sessions to more improvised movement involving ribbons, balloons or balls. Dancing can also be done in a seated position. This is a very social activity and an enjoyable way to participate in exercise. It can increase strength and flexibility, help with staying steady and agile, and reduce stress.

## Seated exercises

People with dementia can benefit from a regular programme of seated exercise sessions at home or with a group at a local class. It is often a good idea to see these exercises demonstrated at least once by an instructor or on a video. These exercises are aimed at building or maintaining muscle strength and balance, and are less strenuous than exercises in a standing position. They can be part of a developing programme, with the number of repetitions of each exercise increased over time. Some examples of seated exercises include:

- marching
- turning the upper body from side to side
- raising the heels and toes
- raising the arms towards the ceiling
- raising the opposite arm and leg
- bending the legs
- clapping under the legs
- bicycling the legs
- making circles with the arms
- practising moving from sitting to standing.

## Swimming

Swimming, under supervision, is a good activity for people with dementia. Many people find the sensation of being in the water soothing and calming. Some studies have also shown that swimming may improve balance and reduce the risk of falls in older people.

## Tai chi/qigong

Tai chi and qigong are gentle forms of Chinese martial arts that combine simple physical movements and meditation, with the aim of improving balance and health. The movements concentrate on

a series of integrated exercises. These forms of exercise focus on balance and stability, which are important in staying agile and may reduce the risk of falls.

## **Walking**

Walking suits all abilities. It is free, does not need specialist equipment, and can be done anywhere. The distance and time spent walking can be varied to suit fitness levels. Some local leisure centres and other organisations arrange group walks, supported by a walk leader, of various lengths, so it can also be a social activity (see ‘Other useful organisations’).

## **Exercise in the later stages of dementia**

Physical activity can also be beneficial in the later stages of dementia, if it is possible. Staying mobile may reduce the need for constant supervision from a caregiver. It may also minimise the need for certain adaptations, such as walk-in bathtubs or stair-lifts. Exercises can range from changing position from sitting to standing, walking a short distance into another room, to moving to sit in a different chair at each mealtime throughout the day.

## **What is the right amount of activity in the later stages of dementia?**

There is no definitive answer to this question and the ideal amount of exercise will vary from person to person. People in the later stages of dementia should be encouraged to move about regularly and change chairs, for example when having a drink or a meal. There should be opportunities to sit unsupported (as far as possible) with supervision on a daily basis. A daily routine involving moving around the home can help to maintain muscle strength and joint flexibility.

## Suggested exercises in the later stages of dementia

- When getting up or going to bed, shuffle along the edge of the bed, in the sitting position, from one end of the bed to the other. This helps exercise the muscles needed for standing up from a chair.
- Balance in a standing position. This can be done holding on to a support if necessary. This exercise helps with balance and posture and can form part of everyday activities, for example when showering or doing the washing up.
- Sit unsupported for a few minutes each day. This exercise helps to strengthen the stomach and back muscles used to support posture. This activity should always be carried out with someone else present as there is a risk of falling.
- Lie as flat as possible on the bed for 20–30 minutes each day, trying to reduce the gap between the curve of the back and the mattress. This allows for a good stretch, strengthens abdominal muscles and gives the neck muscles a chance to relax.
- Stand up and move about regularly. Moving regularly helps to keep leg muscles strong and maintain good balance.

## When is exercise not appropriate?

It is important to exercise only as much as your current physical condition allows. Over-exercising may be bad for your health.

If someone experiences pain or feels unwell while taking part, or after increasing their activity levels, they should stop the exercise and seek medical advice.

## Exercise and wellbeing

Taking regular physical exercise is an important part of a healthy lifestyle and can help to maintain wellbeing. Physical activity creates valuable opportunities to socialise with others, and can help improve and maintain a person's independence. This is beneficial to both people with dementia and their carers. Engaging in physical activities

can also improve self-esteem and mood, which in turn encourages more social engagement that may also contribute to wellbeing.

## Other useful organisations

### Age UK

Tavis House  
1–6 Tavistock Square  
London WC1H 9NA

T 0800 169 8787 (general enquiries)  
0800 169 6565 (advice line)  
E [contact@ageuk.org.uk](mailto:contact@ageuk.org.uk)  
W [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)

### Wales – Age Cymru

T 0800 223 444 (advice line)  
E [enquiries@agecymru.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@agecymru.org.uk)  
W [www.agecymru.org.uk](http://www.agecymru.org.uk)

### Northern Ireland – Age NI

T 0808 808 7575 (advice line)  
E [info@ageni.org](mailto:info@ageni.org)  
W [www.ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland)

Provides information and advice for older people in the UK.

## **Extend**

2 Place Farm  
Wheathampstead  
Hertfordshire  
AL4 8SB

T 01582 832760  
E [admin@extend.org.uk](mailto:admin@extend.org.uk)  
W [www.extend.org.uk](http://www.extend.org.uk)

Provides gentle exercise to music for older people and for anyone of any age with a disability.

## **Jabadao**

10 Court Farm  
Stutton Road  
Brantham, Manningtree  
Suffolk CO11 1PW

T 01473 328330  
E [info@jabadao.org](mailto:info@jabadao.org)  
W [www.jabadao.org](http://www.jabadao.org)

Offers courses to enhance the wellbeing of people in the later stages of dementia, using dance-type movement.

## **Keep Fit Association (KFA)**

T 01403 266000  
E [kfa@emdp.org](mailto:kfa@emdp.org)  
W [www.keepfit.org.uk](http://www.keepfit.org.uk)

Membership association offering people the opportunity to meet in a spirit of fun to exercise together. Offers a range of classes, including dedicated classes to people over 50, across the UK.

## **Walk 4 Life**

W [www.walk4life.info](http://www.walk4life.info)

Part of the NHS's Change 4 Life initiative. Offers information about walking, and details of walks and walking groups in your area.

## **Walking for Health**

The Ramblers  
2nd Floor, 89 Albert Embankment  
London SE1 7TW

T 020 7339 8541

W [www.walkingforhealth.org.uk](http://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk)

[www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/contact\(contact form\)](http://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/contact(contact form))

Encourages people to become physically active in their local communities. Walks are free and particularly aimed at people who don't take much exercise.

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This factsheet has also been reviewed by people affected by dementia. A list of sources is available on request.



## Alzheimer's Society National Dementia Helpline

England, Wales and Northern Ireland:  
**0300 222 1122**

9am–8pm Monday–Wednesday  
9am–5pm Thursday–Friday  
10am–4pm Saturday–Sunday

[alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk)

Alzheimer's Society is the UK's leading support and research charity for people with dementia, their families and carers.



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