

DEMENTIA AND LIVING ALONE - FOR CARERS AND PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

Many older people choose to remain living in their own home alone. This decision is based on a number of reasons. Most people who make this decision do so to remain independent. Residential care or nursing home placement is certainly something few, if any of us, ever wish to consider for ourselves.

We often hear from family, “I get so worried leaving her on her own alone...” It is understandable that many carers and loved ones worry about the safety of their relative with Dementia. To care for someone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week can lead to enormous stress on carers, creating feelings of anger, resentment, and isolation. For the person with Dementia, there can also be feelings relating to loss of roles and independence, as two separate lives, roles and values are melded into one routine.

Therefore, for many, independence is of greater priority than physical safety.

Since Alzheimer’s disease and other Dementias are progressive diseases, the physical and behavioural symptoms experienced will gradually increase over time. It is therefore important to plan in advance for any assistance you and your family may need to ensure that independence can be maintained.

Safety at home, is often one of the first concerns raised when talking about living alone at home with Dementia. With a few simple precautions, the risks to the physical safety of the person (and property) can be minimised, allowing the person with Dementia to maintain independence and life roles in their own homes.

Consider the following points:

- Ensure work, financial, legal and health matters are addressed as soon as possible after receiving your diagnosis. If left until late in the disease, the power to make decisions about these matters may be taken away from you. This includes having a Will, Enduring Power of Attorney (EPOA), and an Advanced Health Directive.
- Inform your bank if you have difficulties with keeping track of your accounts, bill payments, and other banking needs. Arrange for payments to be made directly into, and for bills to be paid directly from, your bank account.
- Seek information about getting assistance in the home with medications, meal preparation, housekeeping, general home maintenance, transportation, and home nursing care.
- Arrange for a daily visit or telephone contact by friends, relatives, or a community organisation to remind you of meal times, appointments, or to take your medications. You may consider the use of a calendar, diary, or medication alarms.
- Stay in close contact with your doctor and specialist for regular review of your medical situation. Other forms of physical disability also become more common as we age, limiting our participation in some activities. In addition, an elderly person with Dementia may be less aware of their limitations.

- Remember that Dementia is a progressive disease. Abilities will continue to deteriorate despite the safety measures put into place in the home. The safety measures discussed below will enable the person with Dementia to live more safely at home for longer periods than commonly thought possible.

Consider the following measures for safety and orientation:

- Install a key safe.
- Keep a list of emergency numbers clearly visible next to the phone.
- Label cupboards and drawers with words or pictures that describe their content
- Label photos with the names of those you see regularly
- Maintain your daily routines wherever possible.
- Organise an Occupational Therapy home review, for safety.
- Accidents happen – a risk free life is a myth. A major complication is that many people suffering from Dementia are elderly and therefore at greater risk of accidents occurring at home. This is partly because our sense of balance and reaction time tends to deteriorate with age.

For family and carers, it is essential to know what the person with Dementia can still do and let them do it, even if there are some risks involved. Appropriate supervision is the key. By doing everything for the person, they quickly become more dependent and can exhibit more challenging behaviours.

It is important to realise that the changes you are experiencing are due to the disease.

As always, you will have good days and not so good days. The disease affects each person differently and the symptoms experienced will vary. It is normal to experience many and various emotions such as anger, depression, frustration, confusion, sadness, and loneliness. However, a good sense of humour can help you through the tough times. Laughter is therapeutic. Engage in activities that you enjoy and are fun.

Know that you are not alone. There are people who understand and can support you however much (or little) you wish.

With simple adjustments and safety measures in place, you should be able to maintain your independence for a considerable length of time. However, prepare yourself for the time when you can no longer live on your own. Alzheimer's disease and most other Dementias are accompanied by increasing dependence on others.

Help and assistance is available. For further information please contact Alzheimer's Queensland Advice Line on 1800 639 331.