

# Exercise and physical activity for people with dementia

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Leading a physically active lifestyle can have a significant impact on well-being. Exercise is beneficial for physical and mental health and can improve the quality of life for people in all stages of dementia. It includes a wide range of physical activities from walking across the room or gardening to dancing. This factsheet explains why keeping physically active is important for [people with dementia](#), gives examples of suitable exercises and physical activities for people in different [stages of dementia](#), and suggests how much activity is appropriate.

## Benefits of exercise and physical activity

Benefits include:

- improving general cardiovascular health (relating to the heart and blood vessels) - it can reduce the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease
- reducing the risk of some types of cancer (in particular breast and colon cancer), stroke and type 2 diabetes
- improving physical function - maintaining muscle strength and joint flexibility can be a way of helping people [maintain independence](#) for longer
- 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)
- improved cognition - recent studies have shown that exercise may improve memory and slow down mental decline
- improving sleep
- opportunities for social interaction and reducing the feeling of isolation
- reducing the risk of falls - physical activity can improve strength and balance, and help to counteract the fear of falling

- enhanced confidence about the body and its capabilities - through improved body image and a sense of achievement.

## Before you start

When thinking about exercise, it is important to consider the person's abilities, needs and preferences. Some people will have participated in regular exercise over the years and the concept will not be new, while others might have exercised very little.

People who have not taken part in any formal exercise for some time or those with any of the health issues listed below should seek medical advice from [a GP](#), physiotherapist or relevant healthcare professional before commencing any new physical activity:

- 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, but professional advice is recommended.

It is important to choose activities that are suitable and enjoyable. Exercise can be done on a one-to-one basis 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 mid stages of dementia

There are many suitable exercise opportunities that may be beneficial for people in this stage of dementia. Local community or sports centres often provide a range of organised exercise and physical activity sessions such as seated exercises, tai chi, music and dance, indoor bowls or swimming. Some of these activities can be modified and carried out at home. In addition, walking, gardening and housework are also good forms of exercise.

### Gardening

Gardening is a physical activity that provides an opportunity to get outdoors and is enjoyed by many people. The activity can be varied to suit the person's abilities - from general tidying to weeding, raking up leaves and watering the plants. There is also the satisfaction of watching the plants grow and enjoying their colours, smells and textures. Gardening can be an enjoyable activity for people at all [stages of dementia](#). If the person does not have a garden, tending to indoor plants or flowers can be enjoyable as well.

## **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.

## **Music and dance**

Dancing to music can range from structured tea dances, and couple or group sessions, to more improvised movement involving ribbons, balloons or balls. Dancing to music can also be done in a seated position. Music can trigger past memories and emotions, which can be shared. 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. These exercises are aimed at building or maintaining muscle strength and balance, but are less strenuous than exercises in a standing position. Some examples of seated exercises include:

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

## **Swimming**

Swimming, under supervision, is a good activity for people with dementia. While there is limited scientific evidence of the benefit, many people find the sensation of being in the water soothing and calming.

## **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 believed to positively affect the mind, body and spirit. These forms of exercise

focus on balance and stability which are important in staying agile and may reduce the risk of falls.

## **Walking**

Walking can suit 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 organise group walks of various lengths supported by a walk leader, so it can also be a social activity (see 'Useful organisations' at the end of this factsheet).

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

People who are not currently active should be doing about 30 minutes of activity at least five days a week. This can be broken up into shorter sessions throughout the day, for example, a 15 minute walk to the local shops and then housework or gardening tasks in the afternoon. Regular physical activity is recommended to maximise benefits.

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

Physical activity can also be beneficial in the [later stages of dementia](#). It may help to reduce the need for more supported care and minimise the adaptations needed to the home or surroundings. Exercises can range from changing position from sitting to standing, walking a short distance into another room or moving to sit in a different chair at each mealtime throughout the day.

## **Suggested exercises in the later stages of dementia**

- When getting up or going to bed, move along the edge of the bed, in the sitting position, until the end is reached. This helps exercise the muscles needed for standing up from a chair.
- Balance in a standing position. This can be done holding onto a support if necessary. This exercise helps with balance and posture and can form part of everyday activities such as 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. This exercise allows for a good stretch and gives the neck muscles a chance to relax.
- Stand up and move regularly. Moving regularly helps to keep leg muscles strong and maintain good balance.

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

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.

## When is exercise not appropriate?

If you experience pain while taking part, or after increasing activity levels, stop the exercise and seek medical advice.

Physical activity is not recommended for people who feel tired or unwell.

## Exercise and well-being

A healthy lifestyle includes physical activity as part of a daily routine which will help to maintain well-being for as long as possible. Physical activity creates valuable opportunities to socialise with others and can help improve and maintain a person's independence, which is beneficial both to people with dementia and their carers.

Every person is unique and will have different levels of ability and activities they enjoy. If you want to find out more about suitable exercise and physical activities, contact the GP or a physiotherapist.

## Further reading

Alzheimer's Society produces a range of information including:

- [Keeping active and staying involved](#) (factsheet 505)
- [Staying healthy](#) (factsheet 522)
- [Promoting mobility for people with dementia: a problem-solving approach](#) (48) £30
- Food for thought: A guide to healthy eating for people with dementia (328) £3
- [Alzheimer's Society guide to the dementia care environment](#) (26) £25.
- [Mobility strategies](#) - strategies for specific situations taken from Promoting mobility for people with dementia: a problem-solving approach, available to download from [alzheimers.org.uk/mobilitystrategies](http://alzheimers.org.uk/mobilitystrategies)

To order any of these publications, please call Xcalibre on 01628 529240.

For details of Alzheimer's Society services in your area, visit [alzheimers.org.uk/localinfo](http://alzheimers.org.uk/localinfo)

For information about a wide range of dementia-related topics, visit [alzheimers.org.uk/factsheets](http://alzheimers.org.uk/factsheets)

## Useful organisations

### Age UK

York House

207-221 Pentonville Road  
London N1 9UZ  
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 169 6565  
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  
E [info@ageni.org](mailto:info@ageni.org)  
W [www.ageni.org.uk](http://www.ageni.org.uk)

Provides information and advice for older people in the UK. Age UK has been created by the merger of Age Concern and Help the Aged.

Also see Age UK's Fit as a fiddle website at [www.fitasafiddle.org.uk](http://www.fitasafiddle.org.uk)  
Fit as a fiddle is a nationwide programme of regional and national projects supporting people over the age of 50 with physical activity, healthy eating and mental well-being.

## **Extend**

T 01582 832 760  
W [www.extend.org.uk](http://www.extend.org.uk)

Arranges community-based exercise classes for people in later life and trains people to teach classes.

## **Jabadao**

Jabadao National Centre for Movement Learning and Health  
Viaduct Street  
Pudsey  
West Yorkshire LS28 6AU  
T 01132 310 650  
W [www.jabadao.org](http://www.jabadao.org)

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

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

1 Grove House  
Foundry Lane  
Horsham  
West Sussex, RH13 5PL  
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)

Information about walking and walks in your area.

## Walking for Health

Walking for Health national centre  
The Ramblers  
2nd Floor, 89 Albert Embankment  
London, SE1 7TW  
T 020 7339 8541  
E [walkingforhealth@ramblers.org.uk](mailto:walkingforhealth@ramblers.org.uk)  
W [www.walkingforhealth.org.uk](http://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk)

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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Alzheimer's Society National Dementia Helpline

England, Wales and Northern Ireland: 0300 222 11 22

9.00am-5.00pm Monday-Friday

10.00am-4.00pm Saturday-Sunday

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