

Using equipment and making adaptations at home

Factsheet 429LP
June 2020



As a person's dementia progresses, they may find everyday activities and tasks harder. Using appropriate equipment and making adaptations to the home can help them stay independent for as long as possible.

This factsheet for carers suggests adaptations that can be made to different parts of the house to improve daily life for people with dementia and their carers. These adaptations include using equipment and making changes to design and layout – inside and outside the home.

The factsheet also gives sources of support and advice and explains how to get hold of equipment, including through the NHS and social services. It also covers different types of financial and practical support that may be available.

Contents

- Adaptations and improvements
- Helpful equipment
 - Memory
 - Household tasks
 - Washing, bathing and using the toilet
 - Walking and moving
 - Eating and drinking
- Helpful design and layout
 - Improving design
 - Outside space
- How to get equipment
 - Where to get advice
 - Buying equipment
 - What social services can provide
 - What the NHS can provide
- Grants and assistance
 - Disabled facilities grants
 - Local authority assistance with housing repairs
 - Social fund
 - Charities
 - Home improvement agencies (HIAs)
- Other useful organisations

Using equipment and making adaptations at home

This factsheet lists some of the equipment designed to help people with mainly physical difficulties – for instance, walking sticks, bath steps and non-spill cups. Electronic items that are designed to help people with cognitive or memory problems are classed as ‘assistive technology’ and are not discussed in this factsheet. For more information on these see factsheet 437, **Using technology to help with everyday life**. It may help to read both factsheets together.

Adaptations and improvements

As a person’s dementia progresses, they may find everyday tasks harder without the support of other people. For example, they might forget where an item is usually kept, or try to use objects or tools in the wrong way. Or they may forget how to complete certain activities, like making a cup of tea or getting dressed. This might make living in their own home more challenging. However, changes can be made to a person’s home to make it easier, safer and more comfortable. This can help them go about their daily routine with less assistance for as long as possible.

Adaptations range from adding grab rails or installing ramps or wide doors for wheelchairs, to installing specially designed shower and toilet facilities. Improving the design and layout of the home can also be helpful, for example by rearranging the furniture or changing the lighting. Draught-proofing, using more efficient heating, and removing trip hazards such as worn carpets can also be helpful.

Gardens have been found to contribute to a better quality of life for some people with dementia. Improvements and adaptations to outside spaces can make them more suitable for a person with dementia. For more information on this see the section ‘Outside space’ on page 9.

Decisions about equipment and layout should be made with the consent of the person with dementia where possible, especially if the changes might restrict their freedom. Any changes must be based on the person's individual circumstances and needs and must be made with their best interests in mind. If adaptations are made to the home, these should also be regularly reviewed to ensure that they remain helpful.

An important aspect to consider is who pays for adaptations and improvements – and what is available for free. The extent of the work will usually determine who will cover the cost. For more information see 'How to get equipment' on page 9.

Helpful equipment

Equipment doesn't have to be expensive or complicated to be helpful. Even small, everyday items have been found to make a positive difference to people with dementia living in their own homes. For example, products designed to help older people live well can also be very useful for people with dementia. These include mobility aids and equipment for maintaining continence.

There are also many products designed specifically to address the needs of people with dementia, such as memory aids. It is usually a good idea for the person to start using any new equipment as early as possible, so that they can get used to it being part of their daily routine.

Memory

There are a range of memory aids to help people remember important things. Whiteboards are useful for writing lists and reminders. Clocks with large faces are easier to read, and can display the date, and even the time of day. Diaries and calendars are useful for keeping track of appointments and routines.

Equipment such as dosette boxes – boxes with a separate pill compartment for each day of the week – can help with taking medication. Dosette boxes are more suitable for people in the earlier and middle stages of dementia because the person needs to know what day of the week it is. Automatic pill dispensers – which can be set in advance – may be more suitable for those with more advanced memory difficulties.

For more suggestions of ways to live well with memory problems see booklet 1540, **The memory handbook**.

Household tasks

Specially designed kitchen equipment is available. This aims to make cooking easier and safer for people who have difficulties with movement and co-ordination. One example is a kettle tipper – a frame that allows hot water to be poured safely. Other equipment includes grip extensions for controls on appliances like ovens and taps. Timers can be set to remind people that they have food in the oven or on the hob. Tray trolleys can be helpful when transporting items. Putting up signs can also be helpful to remind the person where cooking items are located. Non-slip rubber gloves can make washing-up safer.

Other household tasks involve standing up for periods of time. To help make this more comfortable, people with dementia could use perching tools. These are special seats that allow people to sit while performing tasks like ironing and cleaning. If the person forgets the order of certain tasks, a whiteboard, photographs or notes that show the steps needed for each task can also be useful.

Washing, bathing and using the toilet

There are many devices that can make the bathroom safer and easier to use. Transfer benches, grab rails or bath steps may be useful for getting into and out of baths or showers. There are also various hoists available which use pulleys to lower and raise a person into and out of a bath. If it would be more comfortable to sit in the shower or bath, bath seats and bath boards (which lie across the top of the bathtub, allowing a person to sit) can be helpful. Sometimes, it is not possible to adapt an existing bath. In these cases, a walk-in bath, shower or wet room can also be fitted.

When bathing, smaller items such as long-handled sponges and safety plugs (to limit how much water can be filled into the bath) can also be very useful.

Many people find that a raised toilet seat and grab rails make the toilet easier to use. Equipment such as commodes and bedpans, as well as waterproof mattresses and pillows, can help people to manage incontinence. Pads and pull-up incontinence pants are also widely used. For more information on incontinence aids see factsheet 502, **Continence and using the toilet**.

Walking and moving

There are lots of different walking sticks, walking frames and wheelchairs to help people keep mobile and independent. Grab rails can be fitted throughout the home, and a stairlift might be useful if staircases become difficult to use.

Transfer aids are also available to help people move from one place to another. These include devices like a transfer turntable, where a person sits or stands on a base which slowly turns. Hoists, pulleys and slings can also help to raise or lower people from or into a bed or chair. Some hoists are not fixed, so they can be used throughout the house.

Riser-recliner chairs can be used to help a person sit or stand. Beds can be adapted to make them height-adjustable. Smaller items such as bed hand blocks, which people can use to push themselves up a bed, can also be helpful.

Everyone with dementia experiences the condition differently, and what may be useful for one person may not be appropriate for another. As dementia progresses, the support that the person needs will change. They may need to be reminded how certain equipment works or become unable to use it. Not everything included in this factsheet will be of use to everyone, but it can help to know what is available.

Equipment will not be the answer to every problem, and there may be times when changing the way that something is done works better for the person with dementia. For example, someone who has difficulties sitting in the bath may find it easier to have a shower in a standing position with appropriate support. It is also important to recognise that a piece of equipment may help the person to be safer and more independent, but they may still need assistance.

Eating and drinking

Dementia may affect a person's co-ordination or swallowing and, as a result, their ability to eat and drink. The person may benefit from equipment such as cutlery with cushioned handles that are easier to grip. Non-spill cups with large handles, and one-way straws which do not let liquid travel back down, can also help. For more information on this see factsheet 511, **Eating and drinking**.

Some people with dementia may have difficulties eating and drinking due to visual problems, such as not 'seeing' items on the table because they are a similar colour to the tablecloth. Use cutlery, crockery and other tableware items in colours that contrast with each other. The colour of the food can also have an effect – for instance light-coloured foods (such as mashed potatoes) on a light-coloured plate may not be very visible. A dark red plate could help in this situation.

Helpful design and layout

As well as using equipment, making changes and adaptations to the arrangement and layout of areas around the home can be helpful for people with dementia. This includes furniture and fittings. Keep surfaces and floors clear and uncluttered to reduce confusion and help prevent trips and falls. Signs on doors and cupboards can make it easier for the person to find their way around the home.

Lighting is particularly important to help keep the person safe. Lights that come on automatically may help prevent falls if the person gets out of bed and walks about at night. For more information on this see factsheet 437, **Using technology to help with everyday life**.

Improving design

Certain patterns and surfaces cause problems for some people with dementia, who find it hard to understand what they are seeing. Patterned carpets, for example, can be mistaken for uneven ground, and dark mats can be confused for holes in the floor. Shiny surfaces and mirrors can also be confusing as someone may not realise that what they are seeing is a reflection.

Removing these types of surfaces and patterns will help to make the home safer and easier to get around for someone with dementia. Marking out the edges of steps can be helpful for people with dementia. In the same way, using contrasting colours makes items round the house easier to locate, identify and use. This could include:

- toilet seats in a colour that contrasts with the toilet bowl and the floor
- light switches in a different colour to the wall
- handrails, taps and towels that contrast with the rest of the bathroom
- handles on doors, cupboards and drawers in a colour which stands out
- cutlery, crockery and tablecloths in a different colour to the table and the food.

For more on these topics see booklet 819, **Making your home dementia friendly**.

Outside space

Enjoying fresh air and spending time outside can help improve the wellbeing of people with dementia. Gardens can help a person to do this in a safe and familiar environment.

Design and layout of gardens can affect how suitable they are for people with dementia. Ways of improving them include making the garden easier to get around by using a path which is free of obstacles and uneven surfaces. Ramps and handrails can be installed to help the person move around the garden. A raised flower or vegetable bed may also be helpful if a person has difficulty reaching down to work in the garden.

Sturdy garden chairs can provide a place for the person to sit and look around the garden. All garden furniture, such as chairs and tables, will be easier to see and identify if it's a different colour to its surroundings.

To help make the seating area more relaxing for people with dementia, garden ornaments and colourful plants could be set up and planted nearby. Wind chimes and small water features can also have a calming effect for a person with dementia.

How to get equipment

The vast range of products available can feel daunting when you're considering how to make things easier for a person with dementia. Focus on their individual needs and use available help and support.

Where to get advice

When you're considering getting equipment or making adaptations to the home, get advice from health or social care professionals.

An occupational therapist can advise on equipment and strategies to help with everyday activities, from washing and dressing to moving around the home. As the person's dementia progresses, an occupational therapist can also advise on appropriate ways to cope with changes in mental and physical abilities. Occupational therapists work in health and social services, and in both private and voluntary organisations. You can contact an occupational therapist through the GP or hospital consultant, or through your local authority's social services team. For private occupational therapists, contact the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (for contact details see 'Other useful organisations' on page 18).

A qualified physiotherapist (known as a 'chartered physiotherapist') can suggest ways of helping someone with dementia move safely. They can also advise on mobility aids, such as walking frames and wheelchairs. If the person goes to the hospital, they can ask to speak to a physiotherapist based there. Otherwise, they can ask the GP for a referral to the hospital physiotherapy department. For private chartered physiotherapists, contact the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (for contact details see 'Other useful organisations' on page 18).

A district nurse can advise on the kind of equipment needed for nursing someone at home, as well as any adaptations that might be useful. Continence advisers can also help by giving advice and information on problems relating to incontinence. They can suggest specific aids and equipment to help with this. Both district nurses and continence advisers can be contacted through the GP surgery or health centre.

Buying equipment

When looking for a piece of equipment, it is useful to see how the product works before buying it. Depending on the product, someone in the shop may be able to give you a product demonstration to show you how it works. If you are not able to see the product before buying it, there might be online videos which show people using and reviewing the items.

The Disabled Living Foundation can also give advice about equipment, and their online tool AskSARA uses results from a questionnaire to suggest products that might be helpful (see 'Other useful organisations' on page 18). Disabled living centres and 'assisted living' shops on the high street can also be helpful for obtaining more information about equipment, and for trying out products before buying them. There are also events focusing on older people and people with dementia, such as the Alzheimer's Show, where suppliers of equipment often showcase their products and give an opportunity to try them out.

Once you have decided what might be needed, you can buy equipment from many different sources. Many suppliers have mail order services or an online shop, and some items may be available from high street retailers and local pharmacies. It is also worth noting that sometimes the best 'equipment' may just be a simple household item from an ordinary shop, such as a walking stick or long-handled sponges. To see a range of products including equipment and adaptations specifically designed for people with dementia, go to Alzheimer's Society's online shop or download the **Helpful everyday products** catalogue from shop.alzheimers.org.uk/catalogue-download

Some equipment designed to help with disability such as wheelchairs, sanitary devices and riser recliner chairs should be exempt from VAT, so it is a good idea to ask about this before buying.

Tips for buying equipment

If you are thinking of buying equipment, it may help to ask yourself the following questions:

- How easy is it to set up and use?
- Is it safe for the person to use on their own?
- If the product needs to be installed, who arranges this and is there a charge?
- Will the equipment make tasks more difficult for you or other people in the household?
- Will the person need to be shown how to use it?
- Is there an easier or cheaper option?
- Could using or relying on the equipment lead to a loss of current skills or other negative consequences?
- Does the equipment need regular maintenance? Who does this and who pays for this?
- Are spare parts easy to get? Are they expensive?

It is a good idea to buy products which have been tested and approved by standards institutes, as this guarantees that the item has passed certain quality checks. Equipment that conforms to European safety standards will have a CE kitemark. You may also see a BSI mark on some products. This means they have been tested and approved by the British Standards Institution.

It is also a good idea to buy products from an organisation which belongs to a trade association such as the British Healthcare Trades Association. If a company is part of a trade association, it has to sign up to a code of practice which ensures that it meets particular standards of service.

Hiring equipment

If equipment is only needed on a short-term basis, then it may be possible to hire rather than buy it. The duration of these hires will vary depending on whether the GP or occupational therapist has made a medical referral for the equipment. Some charities and organisations offer this service – for example, the British Red Cross lend wheelchairs and toilet aids free of charge. A specialist hire company or the manufacturer or supplier of the products may also be able to lend them out temporarily. The Disabled Living Foundation or your nearest disabled living centre should be able to give more details on this.

For more information about all of the organisations above, see ‘Other useful organisations’ on page 18.

What social services can provide

Social services departments have a duty to assess the care and support needs of a person living with dementia. This will usually include making recommendations for equipment or adaptations that could help in the home. This is called a ‘needs assessment’, and everyone has a right to one, even if they will need to pay for their own care. Carers can also ask the local authority for a carer’s assessment, which looks at services that may be helpful for the person providing care.

The aim of these assessments is to work out exactly what the person’s individual needs are, and the level and type of support required to meet these needs. For more information see factsheet 418, **Assessment for care and support in England**, factsheet W418, **Assessment for care and support in Wales** or factsheet NI418, **Assessment for care and support in Northern Ireland**.

An occupational therapist can also visit the home to assess if any equipment or adaptations are needed. This is called an occupational therapy home assessment and can be set up by social services.

The occupational therapist will advise on whether or not a particular adaptation or piece of equipment will help to meet the person’s needs. They can arrange to provide minor adaptations such as handrails, adapted cutlery and special chairs. The equipment available will vary from one local authority to another.

Social services will also carry out a financial assessment to decide whether or not someone qualifies to have their care and support funded. Social services have a duty to fund some aids and minor adaptations up to a cost of £1,000 for each adaptation. This includes the cost of buying and fitting the adaptation and is offered regardless of the person's income and savings. Adaptations of this kind include equipment for daily living such as shower chairs, a concrete ramp or steps and raised toilet seats.

More expensive equipment can also be provided by social services, but this will be means-tested, meaning it will depend on the person's financial situation. If major adaptations are needed, grants towards the cost may be available in some cases (for more information see 'Grants and assistance' on page 15).

Even if funding cannot be provided, the needs assessment may still give helpful advice about the kind of care and support needed. For more information on financial assessments see factsheet 532, **Paying for care and support in England**, factsheet W532, **Paying for care and support in Wales** or factsheet NI532, **Paying for care and support in Northern Ireland**.

After a financial assessment, some people may be given a personal budget by social services which they can use to hire or buy their own equipment. This is given as a direct payment. The person may have to contribute to this budget themselves, depending on their financial situation. For more information see factsheet 473, **Personal budgets**.

What the NHS can provide

The NHS can provide certain types of equipment to aid mobility, such as walking sticks, walking frames and wheelchairs. These are provided on long-term loans, for as long as the item is needed, and can be arranged through the GP, hospital consultant or physiotherapist. There is no charge for the equipment, but a refundable deposit may be needed.

Wheelchairs – which are available from the local NHS wheelchair service – are usually standard models. Some health authorities offer voucher schemes towards the cost of a more expensive chair. The wheelchair service can supply details on this. The NHS will pay for servicing and repairs, as long as these are not needed because of misuse or neglect.

Equipment needed for nursing someone at home, such as bedpans, pressure relief mattresses, hoists or hospital beds, should be available on free loan from the local NHS community health service. An occupational therapist or district nurse will assess whether this equipment is needed.

Grants and assistance

Some pieces of equipment will be provided directly by local authority social services – see ‘What social services can provide’ on page 13. For other pieces of equipment or adaptations, the local authority may be able to supply a grant or some other assistance. Some of the types of support available are outlined below.

Disabled facilities grants

Disabled facilities grants are designed to help meet the cost of adapting a home for the needs of a disabled person, including people with dementia. The changes must be necessary and appropriate to meet the person’s needs, and be reasonable depending on the age and condition of the property.

They can be awarded for:

- improving a disabled person’s access to and from their home
- improving a disabled person’s access to:
 - the main family room in their home
 - their bedroom (or providing a new bedroom)
 - the bathroom (or providing a new bathroom, and making it easier for the person to use the facilities)
- making the home safe for a disabled occupant and anyone else living with them
- making it easier for the disabled person to prepare and cook food
- improving the heating system or providing a suitable new heating system
- making it easier for the person to move around their home, especially if they are providing care for someone else who also lives there
- improving or moving controls for heating, lighting and plug sockets.

Disabled facilities grants are mandatory, meaning that if a person meets the requirements for receiving one, the grant must be available to them. Both homeowners and tenants can apply for disabled facilities grants. The person with the disability does not have to put in the application themselves – someone else can apply for them.

The grants are means-tested, which means that the amount of money given will depend on the person's income and savings, as well as those of their partner, if they have one. The amount of money given will also depend on the type of adaptation needed.

The maximum amount available as a disabled facilities grant is £30,000 in England, £36,000 in Wales and £25,000 in Northern Ireland.

Disabled facilities grants are generally managed by the local housing authority rather than the social services department, although this may vary across different local authorities. An application form should be available from the grants department of your local authority offices. Grants will not be considered if work on the home has already begun, so applications should be sent in before any work begins.

Local authority assistance with housing repairs

Local housing authorities are able to help people with repairs, adaptations and improvements to their home. Assistance can be given in the form of a grant, a loan, labour, materials, advice or any combination of these. They can set their own conditions for this, such as whether to perform a means test, and how financial assistance should be repaid. If financial assistance is provided, they may ask for some sort of security for any help they provide, including taking a charge on a person's home (securing a loan against the value of the house), if the person owns it.

The help available to owner-occupiers, tenants or landlords will depend on each local authority's policy. They must have a published policy that sets out the type of assistance they are willing to provide and under what circumstances. For more information, ask your local authority for a copy of this policy.

Social fund

The Social fund is a scheme run by the government to help people with expenses that are difficult to meet on a low income. Some people may qualify for a budgeting loan from the Social fund to help with the cost of minor repairs or improvements to their home. This may include people receiving benefits from the government such as Income support, income-based Jobseeker's allowance or Pension credit guarantee.

More information about the Social fund is available at local Jobcentre Plus offices. The local authority will also have information about any local welfare schemes brought in to replace the Community care grants which were previously offered by the Social fund.

Charities

Some charities, grant-making trusts, or benevolent funds and trusts may offer help towards the cost of minor adaptations or repairs. Ex-service organisations and those that support retired people in a particular type of work may also help. Turn2Us or your local Citizen's Advice can give you more information on this. Local libraries, advice and community centres and other local agencies such as a housing advice agency may also be able to help. For details see 'Other useful organisations' on page 18.

Home improvement agencies (HIAs)

Home improvement agencies, also known by names such as Care and Repair or Staying Put, are not-for-profit organisations run by local authorities, housing associations and charities. They offer free advice and information to older and disabled homeowners who may need specialist equipment or adaptations to stay in their homes. They offer a number of different services, including small home improvement works and minor repairs. For contact details see 'Other useful organisations' on page 18.

Other useful organisations

Age UK

0800 678 1602 (advice line, 8am–7pm)

www.ageuk.org.uk/contact-us/information-and-advice (contact form)

www.ageuk.org.uk

Wales – Age Cymru

0300 303 44 98 (advice line, 9am–4pm Monday–Friday)

advice@agecymru.org.uk

www.ageuk.org.uk/cymru

Northern Ireland – Age NI

0808 808 7575 (advice service, 9am–5pm Monday–Friday)

advice@ageni.org

www.ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland

Age UK, Age Cymru and Age NI provide information and advice for older people.

Alzheimer's Society online shop

0333 366 0035 (8am–8pm Monday–Saturday, 9am–6pm Sunday)

alzheimers@mosaic-fs.co.uk

shop.alzheimers.org.uk

Alzheimer's Society's online shop offers a wide range of products designed to help with everyday life for people with dementia and their carers.

AlzProducts

024 7642 2224

www.alzproducts.co.uk/contact-us (contact form)

www.alzproducts.co.uk

AlzProducts is a shop that stocks specialist dementia aids and equipment.

British Healthcare Trades Association

020 7702 2141

info@bhta.com

www.bhta.com

British Healthcare Trades Association (BHTA) is the UK's largest healthcare association. It ensures all members who make or sell healthcare and assistive technology products sign up to a code of practice.

British Red Cross

0808 196 3651

www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/hire-a-wheelchair/wheelchair-selection
(for wheelchair service)

contactus@redcross.org.uk

www.redcross.org.uk

The British Red Cross offers a range of services – including care in the home, wheelchair loan and transport assistance – to help those with health issues lead a full life.

Care and Repair Cymru

0300 111 3333 (9am–5pm Monday–Friday)

www.careandrepair.org.uk

Care and Repair Cymru provides home improvement agency services for people living in Wales. Contact details for local offices are listed on their website.

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

020 7306 6666 (8.30am–5pm Monday–Friday)

enquiries@csp.org.uk

www.csp.org.uk

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) is the professional, educational and trade union body for all chartered physiotherapists in the UK. It can provide contact details of private physiotherapists in your area.

Citizens Advice

0800 144 8848 (for England, 9am–5pm Monday–Friday)

0800 702 2020 (for Wales, 9am–5pm Monday–Friday)

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Your local Citizens Advice can provide information and advice in confidence or point you in the right direction. To find your nearest Citizens Advice look in the phone book, ask at your local library or look on the Citizens Advice website.

Disabled Living Foundation (DLF)

0300 999 0004 (helpline, 10am–4pm Monday–Thursday)

info@dlf.org.uk

www.livingmadeeasy.org.uk

DLF provides information about finding simple solutions, such as mobility aids. Their website includes a web tool offering advice on health, home and daily activities (asksara.livingmadeeasy.org.uk).

Foundations HIA

0300 124 0315

www.findmyhia.org.uk/about/contact (contact form)

www.findmyhia.org.uk

Foundations HIA is the national body for home improvement agencies in England. Search their online directory for local agencies.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

03448 920 900 (8.30am–5pm Monday–Friday)

information@nihe.gov.uk

www.nihe.gov.uk

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is the public housing authority for Northern Ireland. They provide information about home improvement agencies in Northern Ireland on their website:

www.nihe.gov.uk/My-Housing-Executive/Adaptations/Agencies

NRS Healthcare

0345 121 8111 (8.30am–5pm Monday–Friday)

productadvice@nrs-uk.co.uk

www.nrshealthcare.co.uk

NRS Healthcare provides products and services designed to support independent living.

Royal College of Occupational Therapists

020 3141 4600

hello@rcot.co.uk

www.rcot.co.uk

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists is the professional, educational and trade union body for occupational therapists. It provides details of independent occupational therapists in your local area.

Turn2Us

0808 802 2000

turn2us.custhelp.com (contact form)

www.turn2us.org.uk

Turn2us (previously Charity Search) is a national charity that helps people in financial hardship to gain access to welfare benefits, charitable grants and support services. Their ‘find an adviser’ service matches you to sources of information and advice on a range of topics in your area (advicefindert.turn2us.org.uk).

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Factsheet 429LP

Last reviewed: June 2020

Next review due: June 2023

Our information is based on evidence and need, and is regularly updated using quality-controlled processes. It is reviewed by experts in health and social care and people affected by dementia.

Reviewed by: Dr Jane M Hibberd, Lecturer in Occupational Therapy and Chia Swee Hong, Occupational Therapist

This factsheet has also been reviewed by people affected by dementia.

To give feedback on this factsheet, or for a list of sources, please email publications@alzheimers.org.uk

People affected by dementia need our support more than ever. With your help we can continue to provide the vital services, information and advice they need.

To make a single or monthly donation, please call us on **0330 333 0804** or go to alzheimers.org.uk/donate

We are Alzheimer's Society. We are a vital source of support and a powerful force for change for everyone affected by dementia. We provide help and hope.

For support and advice, call us on **0333 150 3456** or visit alzheimers.org.uk



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