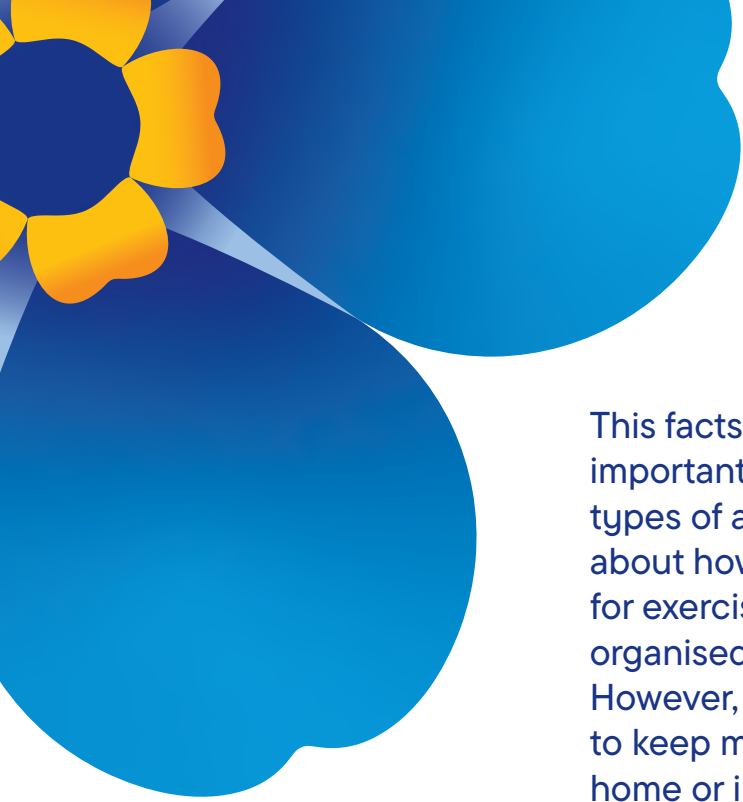


Physical activity, movement and exercise



**Alzheimer's
Society**

It will take a society to beat dementia



This factsheet explains why physical activity is important when you have dementia. It describes the types of activities you can do and includes advice about how much is appropriate. It gives different ideas for exercises and activities. Physical activity can involve organised sports, gym membership or fitness classes. However, this factsheet also contains examples of ways to keep moving and be physically active for free at home or in the community.

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1 The benefits of movement and physical activity

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Physical activity is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. It can help improve your overall wellbeing and bring other advantages. For example, it can give you opportunities to spend time with other people and help you to be independent. Many people find that physical activity makes them feel more positive and more likely to keep doing the things they enjoy. Even short periods of light exercise are more beneficial than not exercising at all.

Physical activity may improve some aspects of memory. For example, it can help you to have clearer memories of certain events, whether or not you have dementia. Alongside other factors such as diet, physical activity may also help to lower the risk of developing the condition at all. However, physical activity has not been shown to slow down or prevent dementia from progressing once a person has the condition.

There are still many health benefits of physical activity, both physically and psychologically, for everyone.

Physical benefits

The physical benefits include:

- improving the health of your heart and blood vessels. This can reduce the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease
- maintaining coordination and balance – exercises that involve moving different parts of your body in different directions help with this
- improving blood supply and nutrients to the brain. This can help thinking skills and memory
- reducing the risk of stroke, type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer
- improving your physical fitness. Maintaining strong muscles and flexible joints can help you do things for yourself. This includes dressing, cleaning and cooking
- improving hand-eye coordination. This is the way that your hands and eyesight work together for some tasks, such as when eating, tying laces or hitting a ball while playing tennis
- helping to keep bones strong and reducing the risk of osteoporosis. This is a disease that makes bones weaker and more likely to break

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- improving sleep quality and energy levels
- for some people, reducing the risk of falls by improving strength and balance.

Psychological benefits

Psychological benefits include:

- improving mental abilities. Some studies have shown that exercise might improve focus and attention
- giving you more confidence and higher self-esteem
- providing opportunities to meet and talk with others. This can help you maintain your sense of identity and prevent you from feeling isolated
- improving your mood and symptoms of depression.

2 Getting started – things to think about

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You might have your own favourite ways to exercise. If you already take part in certain sports or other activities, continue with them for as long as you can. You may need to adapt how you do them at some point. But having dementia doesn't mean you need to stop doing what you enjoy. For example, in a fitness class, you might be more comfortable missing out certain moves or going at a slightly slower pace.

Think about activities you have enjoyed in your life, and whether you might like to try any of them again. Being more active can help you to keep up with your hobbies. This might be walking to watch local sporting events or visiting favourite places. Going for walks with friends or family members can give you the time and opportunity to talk about things in your life that are important to you.

Other underlying health conditions

If you have other health conditions, it's especially important to talk to a health professional beforehand. It doesn't necessarily mean you can't do any activity – in some cases it may even help to be active. But before starting any new activity speak to your GP, a physiotherapist or another healthcare professional, especially if you have any of the following:

- heart problems
- high blood pressure
- unexplained chest pain
- dizziness or fainting
- bone or joint problems
- breathing problems
- balance problems
- frequent falls.

You should only ever exercise as much as you feel able to. If you overdo it, this can be bad for your health. Pay attention to your body when doing something active. Stop doing any activity that causes pain or makes you feel unwell, dizzy or short of breath. You should then speak to your GP again.

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Movement and exercise that feels right for you

The following sections include ways to be active. They are categorised by how intensive they are. Each level of activity causes the body to react differently. They will be suitable for different people depending on their ability.

- **Cardiovascular ('cardio') exercise** is any type of exercise that raises your heart rate. It's good for improving how your heart and lungs work, as well as other parts of your body that help blood circulate. Aim to do this type of exercise on most days of the week, even if only very lightly.
- **Weights-based or strength exercises** are more focused on making muscles stronger. You can use light weights for this if you prefer, or even household items such as bottles of water or tins of food. It's a good idea to aim to do these exercises a couple of times a week if you're able to.
- **Balance and flexibility exercises** help your muscles and joints maintain the movements you need for daily living. These exercises can help you to keep independent for a longer time and help lower the risk of falls.

When you're choosing activities, try to do a combination of all these activities if you can. It's also a good idea to think about:

- **choosing activities that you find enjoyable and suitable** for your mobility and fitness, in a way that works for you
- **your current routines** and how you could build more movement or activity into them. For example, use the ad breaks on the television to stand up or march on the spot until the programme starts again. Anything that breaks up long periods of sitting is a good idea. See page 7 for more ideas for adding movement to your day
- **whether you want to do these activities on your own, with a friend or in a group.** If you are exercising alone, it can be a good idea to let someone know where you will be. Keep a mobile phone with you in case of emergencies. You could also look for dementia-friendly groups or classes in your local gyms or leisure centres
- **trying different activities to see what works best.** You don't have to set goals or give yourself targets to reach. It's more important to do activities that you enjoy, and which you can do regularly
- **the practicalities of any new activity,** such as the cost. Will you need any specific equipment? If you need to travel, how will you get to and from the location? You can also ask at your GP surgery or use our online dementia directory on alzheimers.org.uk/dementiadirectory to see what's available locally. There may be activity groups or places offering different types of exercises available in your area.

You can also find more information on the NHS website or from other organisations, such as We are Undefeatable. See 'Other useful organisations' on pages 14–16.

How much activity should you do?

The guidelines set by NHS England suggest that it's a good idea to aim for around 150 minutes of moderate activity every week. For example, this could be riding a bike or mowing the lawn. Try to do activities that focus on improving strength, balance and flexibility on two or more days a week, if possible. Alternatively, if you're already fairly active, you can aim for 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity per week, such as running or swimming.

It is important to only do as much or as little as you feel comfortable with – any movement you add to your day will be beneficial. These recommendations are something to aim for only if you feel able to do so.

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I do it for myself and my body, and I like the people. I'm always curious – I wouldn't say, 'I'm not going to do that.'

Person with dementia

”

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3 Physical activity if you have mobility difficulties

If you have mobility difficulties and are not able to exercise according to the NHS guidance, there are still a number of ways to keep active. It is important to talk to your GP, a physiotherapist or another healthcare professional before starting.

- **Lie down or sit upright in bed.** Keep your legs straight. Point the toes of one of your feet towards you as far as they will go. Then point your toes away from you as far as you can. Repeat this with your other foot. This exercise can help with flexibility and blood circulation.
- **Sit on the edge of your bed.** Use your hips to shuffle along the edge of the bed, from one end to the other. Stay in a sitting position while doing this. This exercises the muscles needed for standing up from a chair.
- **To help with balance and posture, try standing up and staying balanced.** Hold on to something steady as a support if you need to. This can be done at the same time as you're doing things round the house, for example, the washing up. If this is too easy, try standing on one foot for ten seconds, but make sure there is something you can hold on to close by in case you need it.
- **Sit unsupported and upright for a few minutes each day.** You could sit on a bed or a seat with no back. This exercise strengthens the stomach and back muscles used to support posture. You might want to ask someone to stay with you for this.
- **While sitting on a chair, straighten your back and gently twist round to one side.** Hold this position for a few seconds and then repeat on the other side. This movement is good for stretching and relaxation.
- **If you are able to, stand up and move about regularly throughout the day.** Moving regularly helps to keep leg muscles strong and maintain good balance.

The NHS has exercises on their website for people with mobility difficulties, including people who use wheelchairs. You can find them at www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise

If you don't use the internet or find it difficult, consider asking a family member or friend for help with this.

If you cannot remember the steps for each exercise, try writing them down or printing them out. You can then pin this up somewhere easy to see. You could use a calendar to mark when you have done the exercises each day. Family and friends may be able to help you by giving reminders or finding resources.

4 Less intensive physical activities

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If moderate or vigorous activities aren't suitable for you, you may want to try lighter activities. These may be suitable if you have limited fitness levels or difficulty with movement. They include many daily living tasks such as:

- doing housework
- bringing in the shopping
- taking your dog for a walk
- pacing while waiting for the kettle to boil
- doing some gentle stretches during TV ad breaks
- walking up and down the stairs
- standing up slowly and sitting down again every so often.

Seated exercises

Seated exercises help with muscle strength and balance, and may be better for anyone who finds standing exercises more difficult. You can try doing seated exercises while watching the TV. The intensity can be increased over time by using resistance bands or light weights. However, seated exercises can put a lot of strain on the lower back, so speak to the GP before trying these.

Some examples of seated exercises include:

- gentle marching with your feet
- raising your heels and toes
- raising your arms towards the ceiling
- raising your opposite arm and leg
- straightening your legs in turn
- clapping under your legs
- cycling your legs
- putting your arms out straight and then pulling them back as if rowing
- raising your arms straight out to the sides, and then moving them in small circles
- moving from sitting to standing.

The British Gymnastics Foundation has a dementia-friendly seated gymnastics programme. For more information, go to www.britishgymnasticsfoundation.org/lovetomove

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Being able to achieve a goal or see that difference has increased my happiness and my self-respect because I'm proud of myself. I even tell my wife, 'Look at what I can do!' That feeling is priceless.

Person with dementia

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Examples of less intensive activities

- **Tai chi and qigong** are gentle forms of Chinese martial arts. They use slow and simple movements to improve balance, strength and stability. This can help to reduce the risk of falls and support you to stay agile.
- **Yoga and Pilates** are activities that can improve balance and stability, as well as overall strength. They can help improve how flexible you are. They can also increase how far and easily you can stretch. This is known as your 'range of motion'. There are a number of dementia-friendly yoga and Pilates classes around the UK. For more information, contact Age UK (see 'Other useful organisations' on pages 14–16).
- **Indoor bowls or skittles** can help with balance and hand-eye coordination. Taking part can also provide good opportunities for meeting and interacting with other people. As the movements are quite slow, this reduces the risk of injury. Your local leisure centre may offer indoor bowls sessions, or you can buy sets from some sports stores.

5 Moderate physical activities

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The activities in this section are more likely to get you moving at a moderate intensity. An activity is moderate if it makes you breathe faster and feel warmer. As a guide, you'll still be able to talk but not sing the words to a song.

Remember to warm up and stretch before starting any of these activities.

Everyday and unstructured activities

Walking

Walking can help you to build stamina and increase your overall fitness, as well as helping you if you want to lose weight. It's free, and you can do it anywhere. It also does not need specialist equipment. However, you can use a walking aid if this makes it easier. You can vary how far or for how long you walk according to how fit you are.

Walking does not have to be structured. A 'long walk' can involve going shopping, looking around a museum or art gallery, or taking a pet for a walk.

Walking alone can be a relaxing activity, although it may be a good idea to:

- keep to familiar routes
- take a mobile phone or GPS tracker with you
- think about other equipment to take with you, such as a walking aid or a fitness tracker
- let someone know where you are going.

Walking can also be a social activity which you can do with friends. You could also join a walking group. These are provided by some leisure centres and other local organisations. They arrange walks of various lengths that are supported by a walk leader. See Ramblers in 'Other useful organisations' on pages 14–16.

Many people with dementia also take part in Alzheimer's Society's Memory Walk. This is a sponsored walk for all ages and abilities to come together and raise money to defeat dementia. For more information, go to **memorywalk.org.uk**

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Gardening

Gardening may help to strengthen your muscles and improve your breathing. For many people it's a chance to get outdoors and do something meaningful and enjoyable. Engaging your senses can also help prompt memories from earlier times in your life. You might enjoy talking about this with someone. If you find it hard to get down to weed or prune the plants, consider using raised beds or planters that hang on the fence.

If you don't have your own garden or outside space, there are other ways to take part in gardening activities. There may be allotments in your local area. Some local organisations and schemes offer opportunities to work in community gardens. For more information on these, see Thrive under 'Other useful organisations' on pages 14–16.

You can vary the activity level according to what you feel able to do. This means you could do something that requires less energy, like weeding or pruning. Or you could do a more intensive activity, such as raking or mowing the grass.

A window box can also be good for keeping yourself active in a gentler way – for example, by watering, pruning or repotting plants or flowers.

Sports and structured activities

Going to the gym

Gyms have a range of exercise equipment to help with your overall fitness as well as strengthening muscles. Some people prefer going to a gym to other forms of exercise as they can work out at their own pace and in their own time. Other people enjoy it more as a social activity. You may want to go with other people or take part in exercise classes.

You can adapt your activities at the gym based on what you want to do. For example, if you find it difficult to move around, you may prefer to use equipment like an exercise bike. You can stay seated while exercising your legs. Some gyms also offer dementia-friendly open days, and have staff who can help tailor an exercise program to your needs.

Swimming

When you swim, you work a lot of muscles at once. It's a great cardiovascular exercise. There is also some evidence that it may improve balance and reduce the risk of falls.

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Many people also find the sensation of being in the water calming. You can vary the speed and duration of each swim so it can be as intensive or as light as you wish. If you're a beginner or haven't been swimming for a while, you might enjoy going swimming with someone else. Some pools also offer dementia-friendly swimming classes, which are quieter and attended by trained staff.

See 'Swim England' under 'Other useful organisations' on pages 14–16.

Golf

Golf can help with balance. Golf can also benefit your heart and lungs because of the amount of walking it involves. It can be a more relaxing form of exercise and a chance to be outside. Some people also enjoy competing and playing with other people.

Some organisations arrange structured sessions for people with dementia. These can include group warm-ups and putting challenges. They may also organise golf games of various lengths – for example, nine holes. Golf in Society is an organisation that does this – see 'Other useful organisations' on pages 14–16.

Table tennis

Table tennis can help you to maintain hand-eye coordination. It can be a good opportunity to spend time with other people too.

You can adapt table tennis to suit what you're able to do. For instance, you can play it either sitting down or standing up. Some organisations have introduced tables with features like curved edges and high-contrast colours. This makes the ball and markings easier to see.

Tennis

Tennis is an activity with a number of benefits. These include increasing your stamina, balance and coordination. Like other sports, it gives the chance to spend time with other people.

You may want to play doubles or singles tennis depending on how intensive you need the activity to be. Doubles tennis is usually a moderate activity while singles tennis is usually a lot more intensive.

Some tennis clubs have specially adapted courts to make tennis more accessible. They may also have changes to the usual rules – for example, allowing the ball to bounce more than once before hitting it. Some clubs also offer 'walking tennis'. This allows for a slower pace, as well as playing at special 'quiet times' during the day.

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6 Vigorous physical activities

The following activities are more likely to be vigorous. These types of activities should make you breathe hard and fast. Being this active means you can't say more than a few words before you're out of breath.

Vigorous activities may suit you if you are already active. Speak to your GP or other health professional if you're not currently very active and looking to do any of the activities in this section.

It's very important to warm up and stretch each time before carrying out any of the following activities. This is also the case for moderate activities (see 'Moderate physical activities' on pages 9–11) – many of these can be vigorous if you increase your effort while doing them.

Examples of vigorous physical activities

Riding a bike

Cycling can help with posture, coordination and balance. It's up to you to decide how fast you ride, how far and where you go. You might stick to flat ground or take on more hilly or challenging routes. There are a number of cycling clubs, including some indoor classes designed specifically for people with dementia.

Jogging or running

These activities are both cardiovascular exercises. They can also improve your mood and help you if you want to lose weight.

Jogging and running need very little equipment. However, it's best to wear a pair of well-fitting, supportive running shoes.

If you haven't run much previously, it's important to slowly ease yourself into it. You can then increase the distance you run and the pace gradually over time. The NHS has information on running on their website – see 'Other useful organisations' on pages 14–16.

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Dancing

Dancing offers many ways to be active as well as benefits including:

- increasing strength and flexibility
- helping you to stay steady and agile, which may reduce the risk of falls
- reducing stress and improving mood
- keeping you socially active.

Dancing can be structured with set steps or more improvised, involving ribbons, balls or hoops. Outfits and favourite types of music can also evoke happy memories. Dance classes can include couple or group sessions. If you have mobility issues, you can also perform dance moves in a seated position. There are a number of dementia-friendly dance fitness classes around the UK, as well as other classes that might be suitable. This includes Zumba Gold – a lower-intensity version of Zumba.

Aerobics classes

Aerobics is usually fairly intensive. It gives a good cardiovascular workout and can help with coordination.

Aerobics classes are another sociable way to exercise. Gyms usually offer a range of classes for different levels of fitness. They also sometimes offer dementia-friendly classes.

Team sports (such as football, netball, rugby or hockey)

Team sports can help improve fitness, coordination and balance. They can also increase strength and provide opportunities to meet people.

Some sports groups run less-intensive versions of team sports, for example, dementia-friendly walking football.

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Other useful organisations

Age UK

0800 678 1602 (advice line, 8am–7pm Monday–Sunday)

www.ageuk.org.uk

Age Cymru – Wales

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

advice@agecymru.org.uk

www.agecymru.org.uk

Age NI – Northern Ireland

0808 808 7575 (advice line, 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 in the UK. They also have an exercise directory which can be found at www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/exercise/

British Gymnastics Foundation

<https://britishgymnasticsfoundation.org/lovetomove>

The British Gymnastics Foundation has developed a seated exercise programme called ‘Love to Move’. You can download guidelines on this from its website.

Dementia Adventure

01245 237548 (9am–5pm Monday–Friday)

info@dementiaadventure.co.uk

www.dementiaadventure.org

Dementia Adventure is a charity that organises short breaks and holidays for people living with dementia and their family and friends.

Dementia Toolkit

<https://livingwithdementiatoolkit.org.uk/>

The Dementia Toolkit is a collection of research and evidence-based resources for people with dementia and their carers. They have a specific section on their website called ‘Stay Active’.

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Golf in Society

info@golfinsociety.com
www.golfinsociety.com

Golf in Society design and deliver person-centred golf sessions for people living with certain health conditions, including dementia.

Keep Fit Association (KFA)

01403 266000
kfa@emduk.org
www.keepfit.org.uk

KFA offers people the opportunity to meet in a spirit of fun to exercise together. It offers a range of classes across the UK, including dedicated classes for people over 50.

NHS Live Well

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/>

The NHS is the UK's biggest health website. It includes information on different levels and types of activity, including a large number of videos.

Ramblers (formerly Walking for Health)

www.ramblers.org.uk

The Ramblers is a charity focused on supporting people to enjoy walking in green spaces.

Sporting Memories

www.sportingmemories.uk

Sporting Memories is a charity and social enterprise dedicated to sports reminiscence and physical activities.

Swim England

www.swimming.org/
www.swimming.org/dementiafriendly

Swim England is the national governing body for swimming in England. They help people find swimming classes and enjoy the water safely.

Thrive

0118 988 5688
info@thrive.org.uk
www.thrive.org.uk

Thrive uses gardening to bring about positive changes in the lives of people with health conditions including dementia. It runs gardening programmes at regional centres and also in the community.

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The Walking Football Association (WFA)

info@thewfa.co.uk

<https://thewfa.co.uk>

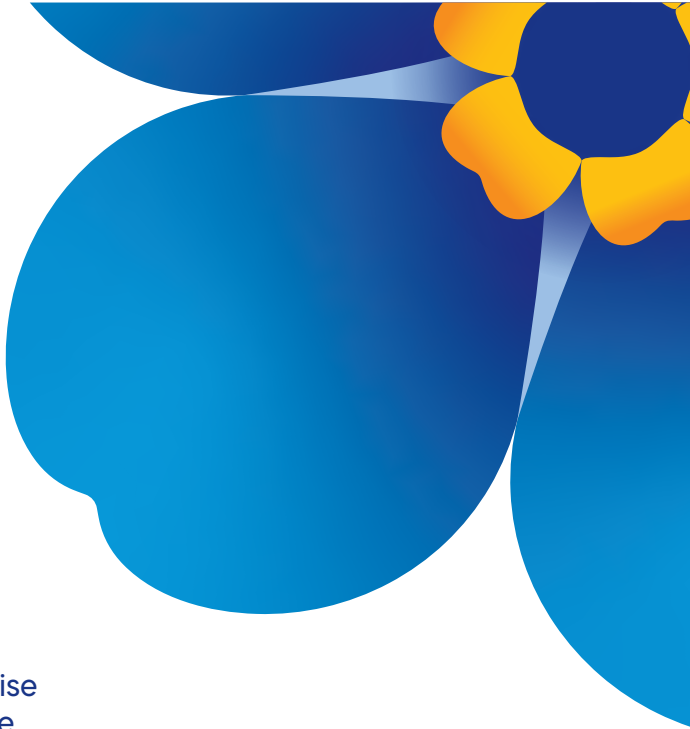
The WFA provides information and resources about the sport, as well as a searchable directory of local clubs.

We Are Undefeatable

WeAreUndefeatable@ageuk.org.uk

<https://weareundefeatable.co.uk/>

We Are Undefeatable is a campaign that supports people with a range of long-term health conditions. It has been developed by 15 leading health and social care charities, including Alzheimer's Society.



Factsheet 529

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Reviewed by: Professor Jeanette Thom, Professor of Exercise Physiology, School of Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health, The University of Sydney and Dr Catherine Quinn, Associate Professor, Centre for Applied Dementia Studies, University of Bradford

This factsheet has 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

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At Alzheimer's Society we're working towards a world where dementia no longer devastates lives. We do this by giving help to everyone who needs it today, and hope for everyone in the future.

We have more information on **Adjusting to life with dementia**.

For advice and support on this, or any other aspect of dementia, call us on **0333 150 3456** or visit **alzheimers.org.uk**

Thanks to your donations, we're able to be a vital source of support and a powerful force for change for everyone living with dementia. Help us do even more, call **0330 333 0804** or visit **alzheimers.org.uk/donate**



It will take a society to beat dementia

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