Living with dementia
Keeping safe at home
Keeping safe is important for everyone, but it can be more of a concern when you have dementia, especially if you live alone.

There are everyday risks around the home that dementia can make harder to deal with. You may experience:

- memory problems, such as forgetting to turn things on or off
- physical difficulties that can make it hard to use stairs or some items of furniture
- changes in what makes you feel comfortable and secure
- being confused about using appliances.

There are lots of things you can do to reduce your risk and help with some of the problems you might face. By doing so you can stay safe at home and stay living there for longer.

‘This lady had a retirement flat in a lovely area and knew all the people there – taking her away from that before she really needed to move would have been a great shame.’

Fire safety worker
This booklet gives tips and advice, and explains what pieces of equipment you may find useful. It includes information about the following areas:

- Making changes to your home
- Keeping secure at home
- Technology
- Electricity, heating and water
- Fire risk, cooking and kitchens
- Stairs and keeping steady
- Getting help

Your local Alzheimer’s Society office may be able to give advice on staying safe at home. Your GP or staff at the memory clinic or social services can also help. They may refer you to an occupational therapist, who can help you to stay independent and safe at home.

There are further tips in Alzheimer’s Society booklet 819, Making your home dementia friendly. It describes ways of making your home into a safe and familiar place as dementia progresses. You can read more about this title and download or order it at [alzheimers.org.uk/dementiafriendlyhome](http://alzheimers.org.uk/dementiafriendlyhome).
General tips

- Keep a list of emergency phone numbers in a convenient location, eg near the telephone. You could also store names and numbers of important contacts in the phone so you don’t need to dial the numbers.

- Keep other useful information to hand, including notes of where the following things are:
  - stopcock (valve for turning off and on the cold water)
  - gas and electricity meters
  - fuses
  - first aid box.

- Keep a large week-to-view diary in a familiar place and write important things down in it.

- Get household appliances checked regularly. Keep records, and store them in a safe place. Remember to:
  - use a qualified electrician for electrical appliances
  - use a Gas Safe registered engineer for gas appliances.
- If you have an open fire, have chimneys swept once a year, or more often if you burn wood.

- Get carbon monoxide detectors and smoke alarms fitted.

- Use timers for plugs, lights and heating systems to turn things on and off automatically.

- Help to prevent falls by making sure the house is well lit. Remove trip hazards such as rugs. Have grab rails fitted on the stairs and in the bathroom.

- Use a personal alarm to alert people if you fall.

For more on any of the equipment and technology mentioned here, see ‘Technology’ on page 11.
Making changes to your home

When you are living with dementia, you may find things harder as the condition progresses. However, you may be able to stay independent and reduce your risk of harm by making changes in your home.

Even if you don’t need to make any structural changes at present (eg building a more accessible shower), it is worth thinking about what you might need in the future. An occupational therapist can advise you on things such as:

- fitting grab rails
- installing ramps
- extra heating
- rearranging or reducing furniture to create a safer living space.

If you do need to make major changes to your home, you may be able to get some funding from your local authority (council). The amount of funding depends on your needs. The occupational therapist can advise you on the next steps to take.
‘Last year I had grab rails fitted in the bathroom and a stair rail because I was beginning to notice occasional bouts of weakness in my husband’s arms and legs.’

Wife of a person with dementia
Keeping secure at home

Feeling safe at home is important for everyone. When you are living with dementia, it is even more important to be alert.

The following tips may help:

- Always be careful when answering the door to strangers.
- Consider having a chain fitted on the inside of the front door.
- If you are expecting a visit from a tradesman or tradeswoman, keep a note of their name and the date they are coming. It may be useful to put a note on the inside of the front door as a reminder.
- If you have an unexpected visit, always ask to see the person’s identification card before letting them in. Call the phone number on the card to check if you are not sure. Don’t be afraid to shut the front door while you do this – if visitors are genuine, they will understand.
- Think about fitting locks to your windows and security locks on your doors. Make sure you know how to open and lock them quickly and easily. Neighbourhood Watch or your local police community support officer (PCSO) can advise (see ‘Other useful organisations’). You may also consider having a telecare system (see ‘Technology’) fitted in the home. This kind of system may be set up to give a response if the front door is open.

Call the National Dementia Helpline on 0300 222 1122
Technology

There are many devices or pieces of technology (known as ‘assistive technology’) that can help you to keep safe at home.

The following are useful devices you might consider having in the home.

• Automatic ‘shut-off’ devices that can stop the gas supply if the gas has been left on, or turn off a cooker if it’s been left on.

• Water isolation devices that can turn off a tap if it’s been left running. This can help to prevent flooding.

• Lights that come on automatically when you move around. They can help to prevent trips and falls, especially if you get up in the night.

• Telephone blockers that can help stop nuisance calls.

Safety devices are sometimes linked to telecare systems (see ‘Telecare’ on page 12).

Some of these items are available from the Daily living aids section of Alzheimer’s Society’s online shop. Go to shop.alzheimers.org.uk/daily-living-aids
Telecare

Telecare is the name for electronic systems or equipment that remotely (from elsewhere) monitor a person living in their own home. They can be used to help you to stay independent and reduce the risks you face when living with dementia, especially if you live alone.

One example of a telecare device is a community alarm. This is a pendant you wear around your neck or as a wristband. You can press it if you become worried or have an accident, such as a fall. Many local authorities offer a community alarm service. You can check their website to apply for one in your area (see ‘Other useful organisations’).

If it is possible, you should buy equipment from a company that belongs to a trade association, such as the British Healthcare Trades Association (see ‘Other useful organisations’). Its members are signed up to a code of practice that covers standards of customer service. This means you can be sure you’re buying the correct products at the right price.

‘His system was linked to a front door alarm – so I was called if he left the door open at night and the operator spoke to him whilst I went round to check on him – it saved his bacon when he went walkabout.’

Relative of a person with dementia
Electricity, heating and water

Electricity

- Don’t use appliances that have worn or damaged flexes, and never put more than one appliance on one plug.

- If you have lots of appliances and only one socket, use a strip extension lead (a long one with a line of sockets on it) instead of lots of adaptors.

- It’s safer to turn appliances off at the plug before you go to bed. There are timers for plugs available so that you don’t have to remember to do this. You can also use timers on lights in hallways, for example, so that you can get to bed safely.

- If you are worried about forgetting to turn off appliances, consider buying electrical appliances such as an electric kettle. They switch off automatically and will help you to stay independent and safe.

Heating

If you have a gas or electric fire, make sure it is serviced regularly. For portable gas or electric heaters, think about fitting an extra guard, and keep them at a safe distance from furniture and curtains.

If you or your carer have additional concerns about using gas or electrical appliances correctly, contact the gas or electricity company. You can ask them to put you on the priority service register. This means you will be eligible for free regular safety checks, and will also be able to receive advice about safety measures.
If you smell gas

- Turn the gas off at the meter.

- Open doors and windows.

- Call the gas emergency service on 0800 111 999.

- Don’t turn electric switches on or off.

- Don’t use naked flames.

- Don’t smoke.

Open fires can be dangerous. Never use one without a fire-guard, and make sure your chimney is swept at least once a year. If you have other ways of keeping warm, try to limit how often you use an open fire.

Never air or dry clothes near a fire, even if it is well guarded. Use electric blankets correctly, and have them checked regularly.
‘If you move people, it can cause disorientation and deterioration. But if you can make their home a safe environment, they can hold onto their memories. It’s so much better for their quality of life.’

Homecare worker
Water
If you find you are forgetting to turn taps off, it is possible to fit taps will stop automatically. For example, some taps will only work if you run your hands under them. Others turn off automatically after a set amount of water has flowed, or after a set time. Your local water company should be able to provide a catalogue of suitable taps. Sensors can also be fitted on skirting boards or floors in the kitchen or bathroom. If taps have been left running and cause a flood, the system will shut off the water and raise the alarm.

Bathrooms
- Never take portable heaters into the bathroom.
- Non-slip mats fitted in the bath can help to prevent accidents.
- If the water gets very hot, it may be possible to adjust the temperature on the boiler.
- When running a bath, put the cold water in first and then the hot water. This reduces the risk of being scalded.
- If you live alone, never lock the bathroom door.
- If you have a walk-in shower, consider using a plastic garden chair with a non-slip mat underneath. Or ask someone to fit a drop-down seat to the wall.
- Dangerous substances, including medicines, should always be stored somewhere safe.
Fire risk, cooking and kitchens

Fire protection
Fitting smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors can reduce the risk of fire in the home. Arrange a visit with the local fire and rescue service. They will come and visit you, free of charge, and can offer advice on fire safety. Some services will also fit free smoke detectors where required. See ‘Other useful organisations’ for more information. Also consider the following when thinking about fire safety in the home.

- Ensure there are enough ashtrays around the house if you smoke.

- Never smoke in bed.

- Try to have, or buy, furniture that is fire resistant.

- Be extra careful when you’re in the kitchen, especially when cooking with oil or fat.

- Never leave lit candles unattended.

- If there is a fire:
  - Don’t try to put it out.
  - Leave the house straight away.
  - Call 999 from a neighbour’s phone, mobile phone outside or from a phone box.
  - Don’t go back in, not even for pets.
Smoke alarms
Smoke alarms give early warning of a fire, by detecting smoke and sounding an alarm. They are not needed in every room and are best fitted in hallways and at the top of stairs. Smoke alarms should not be in the kitchen and bathroom as heat and vapour from cooking and bathing can set them off unnecessarily. Do not fit too many alarms – a lot of noise can be confusing and disorientating. This could make it harder to get away from a fire.

Smoke alarms are run by batteries or by mains electricity. You should test the batteries in your alarms once a week by pressing the button until the alarm sounds. You should replace smoke alarms every ten years.

Cooking
It is important to check that your cooker is safe. For electric cookers, ask a qualified electrician to check it. For gas cookers, arrange a visit with a Gas Safe registered engineer.

If you have memory problems, you may worry that you will forget to turn off the oven or hob. ‘Shut off’ devices are available to stop the gas supply if you forget to turn off the cooker (see ‘Technology’ on page 11).

You can also have a special gas tap fitted that friends and family can turn off when they leave your home. This does mean that you won’t be able to cook unless someone is with you, so you will lose some independence. This can be a difficult decision, but it might keep you safe. Discuss it with family and friends before going ahead.

You might consider using a microwave instead of an oven. It can make cooking easier and can also be used to reheat food.
Kitchen

- Try to plan your kitchen so that things you use often are within easy reach. Also try to do the same for heavy things, such as flour and sugar or heavy equipment.

- Where possible, avoid climbing on chairs to reach cupboards. If you do need to reach high cabinets, use a small stepladder.

- Throw away food that has gone off or out of date. You could put a note on the fridge door as a reminder.

- If you have problems cutting food, try putting a non-slip mat under dishes or boards. This stops them from moving while preparing meals.

- You can buy knives with specially shaped handles, which are easier to control. Keep knives sharp and in good condition. Make sure you have a can opener that is easy to use.

- An electric kettle is better than a stove-top kettle as it automatically switches off once it has boiled. Don’t overfill the kettle, and only boil as much water as you need.

- Take extra care with boiling water, and use mugs and cups that have a wide base.

- Label cupboards and objects with pictures and words so that they can be identified.

- Place clear instructions that can easily be followed somewhere visible, such as on the fridge.

For more information visit alzheimers.org.uk
Stairs and keeping steady

**Stairs**

Falls on stairs and steps can cause injuries, so it is important to make them safe.

- If carpets or floor coverings are worn or damaged you should replace them.

- Try to make sure any banisters are sturdy.

- Consider fitting easy-grip handrails on the walls on both sides of the stairs.

- Keep stairs free from clutter, and try not to carry too much when using them. If you do have a few things to carry, think about using a large shoulder bag that will keep both hands free.

**Reducing the risk of falls**

You can reduce your risk of falling by doing strength or balance exercises twice a week. These include sitting, standing and walking exercises. Your GP could also refer you to a physiotherapist.

Check your home for potential hazards such as rugs, loose or worn carpets, furniture or objects lying around.

The following tips are also worth considering.

- Make sure your house is well lit, especially in the hall, landing and on the stairs. Use long-life light bulbs.

Call the National Dementia Helpline on **0300 222 1122**
• Keep a torch by the bed.

• Make sure electrical items are close to sockets to avoid trailing wires and flexes along the floor.

• If you have mobility or back problems, have a letter tray fitted on your front door to collect the post.

• Be careful when trying to get to something or somewhere that is out of reach. Make sure you have enough support and a secure footing.

• Stand up slowly when getting up from chairs or out of bed.

• Have regular eye tests.

• Avoid wearing clothes that are too long and may cause you to trip up.

• If your prescribed drugs are making you feel dizzy, keep taking them, but talk to your GP.

• Patterned carpets can cause perception problems for some people – think about replacing with a plain version.

• Consider fitting grab rails, especially on the stairs and in the bathroom.
Getting help

Talk to your family and friends about what help they could offer. They may be able to help you to stay safe by checking in on you now and again, or helping you out with things you find difficult – for example, getting things from high shelves or an attic or loft. You could also think about leaving a spare set of keys with a good friend in case someone needs to get in the house.

You could have a key safe fitted to an outside wall instead. This contains a set of house keys and is opened by a code. You can give this code to trusted people (eg carers who visit) so they can get in easily if you need them to.

For other kinds of help, see the ‘Other useful organisations’ section on the next page. It lists organisations that can assist you with staying safe at home, including technology and equipment, different types of engineers, fire safety and Neighbourhood Watch.
Warm and well this winter
Other useful organisations

Association of Plumbing and Heating Contractors (APHC)
12 The Pavillons
Cranmore Drive
Solihull B90 4SB
T 0121 711 5030 (main switchboard)
E info@aphc.co.uk
W www.aphc.co.uk

A professional body that can give you the details of a qualified plumber or heating engineer in your area.

AT Dementia
T 0115 74 84220
W www.atdementia.org.uk

Website that provides information on assistive technology for people with dementia.

British Healthcare Trades Association
Suite 4.6
The Loom
14 Gowers Walk
London E1 8PY
T 020 7702 2141
E bhta@bhta.net
W www.bhta.net

Membership association for companies that make equipment and assistive technology for people with health conditions.
College of Occupational Therapists
106–114 Borough High Street
London SE1 1LB
T 0845 129 7699 (general enquiries)
E enquiries@cotss-ip.org.uk
W www.cotss-ip.org.uk

Professional body for occupational therapists. Can put you in touch with a qualified OT in your area.

Gas Safe Register
PO Box 6804
Basingstoke RG24 4NB
T 0800 408 5500
0800 408 0606 (textphone)
E enquiries@gassaferegister.co.uk
W www.gassaferegister.co.uk

Official register of qualified and safe gas engineers.

GOV.UK (apply for a community alarm in your area)
W www.gov.uk/apply-for-community-alarm

National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contracting (NICEIC)
T 0870 013 0382
E enquiries@niceic.com
W www.niceic.org.uk

Professional body for electrical industry. Can put you in touch with a registered electrician in your area.
Neighbourhood Watch
Wigston Police Station
Bull Head Street
Leicestershire LE18 1WX
T 0116 229 3118
E enquiries@ourwatch.org.uk
W www.ourwatch.org.uk

Social movement that aims to build safer communities. The website can give you details of the local Neighbourhood Watch scheme in your area.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents
RoSPA House
28 Calthorpe Road
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 1RP
T 0121 248 2000
E help@rospa.com
W www.rospa.com

Charity that works to reduce accidents by campaigning to change attitudes and legislation. Provides information on how to reduce accidents around the home.

UK Fire Service
W www.fireservice.co.uk/safety

Provides information on fire safety in the home.
This publication has been reviewed by people affected by dementia and health and social care professionals. A full list of sources is available on request.

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Alzheimer’s Society is the UK’s leading support and research charity for people with dementia, their families and carers. We provide information and support to people with any form of dementia and their carers through our publications, National Dementia Helpline, website, and more than 3,000 local services. We campaign for better quality of life for people with dementia and greater understanding of dementia. We also fund an innovative programme of medical and social research into the cause, cure and prevention of dementia and the care people receive.

If you have any concerns about Alzheimer’s disease or any other form of dementia, visit alzheimers.org.uk or call the Alzheimer’s Society National Dementia Helpline on 0300 222 1122. (Interpreters are available in any language. Calls may be recorded or monitored for training and evaluation purposes.)

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