

Dressing

Physical appearance contributes to a person's sense of self-esteem. For the person with dementia, choosing and putting on clothes can be frustrating. The person may not remember how to dress or may be overwhelmed with the choices or the task itself.

There are many reasons why the person with Alzheimer's might have difficulty dressing, including the following:

Physical problems

Does the person have problems with balance or with motor skills that are needed to fasten buttons or close zippers?

Thinking problems

- Does the person remember how to dress?
- Does he or she recognize her clothes?
- Is he or she aware of the time of day or season of the year?

Environment

- Is the person troubled by lack of privacy, a cold room, poor lighting or loud noises?

Other concerns

- Are you rushing the person to get dressed quickly?
- Are you giving the person clear step-by-step instructions on how to dress or does the task seem too complicated?
- Is the person embarrassed by dressing in front of you or others?

Once you've answered these questions, you'll be in a better position to help the person get dressed.

Simplify choices

- Lay out proper clothes for the person, including appropriate selections for warm and cool weather.
- If appropriate, give the person an opportunity to select favorite outfits or colors. Try offering just two choices of shirts or pants.
- Keep the closets free of excess clothing. A person may panic if clothing choices become overwhelming.

Choose comfortable and simple clothing

- Choose comfortable and loose-fitting clothing that's easy to put on and remove.
- Cardigans, shirts and blouses that button in front are sometimes easier to work than pullover tops.
- Substitute Velcro® for buttons, snaps and zippers, which may be too difficult to handle.
- To avoid tripping and falling, make sure that clothing length is appropriate.

- Make sure the person wears comfortable, non-slip shoes.
- If the person is confined to a wheelchair, adapt regular clothes to protect his or her privacy and allow for greater comfort.
- Make sure that clothing is loose fitting, especially at the waist and hips — and choose fabrics that are soft and stretchable.

Organize the dressing process

- Lay out clothes in the order each item should be put on.
- Hand the person one item of clothing at a time while giving short, simple instructions such as “Put on your shirt,” rather than “Get dressed.”
- Don’t rush the person. Haste can cause anxiety.

Be flexible

- If the person wants to wear the same outfit repeatedly, try getting a duplicate of it or have similar options available.
- It’s alright if the person wants to wear several layers of clothing, just make sure he or she doesn’t get overheated.
- Offer praise, not criticism, if clothing is mismatched.

The Alzheimer’s Association is the world’s leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer care, support and research.

Updated October 2004