

Bathing

As Alzheimer's or dementia progresses, people living with the disease eventually need help with bathing. This need commonly begins in the middle stage (sometimes referred to as the moderate stage in a medical context) and continues into the late (severe) stage. Bathing can be a challenge because people living with Alzheimer's may be uncomfortable receiving assistance with such an intimate activity. They may also have depth perception problems that make it scary to step into water. Or they may not perceive a need to bathe or find it a cold, uncomfortable experience.

If people regard bathing as scary, embarrassing, unpleasant or uncomfortable, they may communicate their discomfort by verbally and/or physically resisting attempts to bathe. In some cases, this can escalate and become unsafe and upsetting for everyone involved. There are ways to make bathing easier and more comfortable — however, each situation is unique, and finding what works is often the result of trial and error. The following tips may help:

Know the person's abilities.

Encourage the person to do as much as possible independently, but be ready to assist when needed. Understanding the person's abilities will help you know where to focus your help. Assess their ability to:

- Find the bathroom.
- See clearly.
- Maintain balance without fear of falling.
- Reach and stretch arms.
- Remember the steps in the bathing process and follow cues or examples.
- Use different products (i.e., soap, shampoo, washcloth, etc.).
- Sense water temperature.

Prepare the bathroom in advance.

- Gather bathing supplies, such as towels, washcloths, shampoo and soap before you tell the person that it's time to bathe.
- Use grab bars on the wall and tub edge, if available.
- Make sure the room is safe and warm.
- Place a shower stool inside the tub or shower. Pad the seat and other cold or uncomfortable surfaces with towels.
- Use large beach towels or bath blankets that completely wrap around the person for privacy and warmth.
- Have a washcloth ready to cover the person's eyes to prevent stinging from water or shampoo.

- Make sure that soap and shampoo are within reach.
- Fill the tub with only two to three inches of water.
- Assess the person's reaction to getting into the water.
- Try using a hand-held showerhead, but make sure the spray isn't too harsh.
- Monitor the water temperature. The person may not sense when the water is dangerously hot or may resist bathing if the water is too cool.

Focus on the person, not the task.

- Give the person choices. For example, ask if they would like to bathe now or in 15 minutes, or take a bath or a shower. Try saying "Let's wash up," instead of "Let's take a bath."
- Be sure the person has a role in the bathing process. For example, give the person a washcloth, sponge or shampoo bottle to hold.
- Be aware that the person may perceive bathing to be threatening. If the person is resistant, distract him or her and try again later.
- Praise the person for their efforts and cooperation.
- Always protect the person's dignity, privacy and comfort. Consider covering the person with a bath towel while undressing to decrease feelings of vulnerability.
- Try having a familiar person of the same sex help with bathing if that is more comfortable for the person living with dementia.
- Try different approaches to coax the person into the tub or shower. For instance, allow the person to get into the tub or shower with a towel on to reduce embarrassment or to help the person feel warmer.
- Have activities ready in case the person becomes agitated. For example, play soothing music or sing together.

Adapt the bathing process.

- Try bathing at the same time of day the person is used to as part of their routine. If the person is usually a morning bather, a bath in the evening may be confusing.
- Use simple phrases to coach the person through each step of the process, such as, "Put your feet in the tub." "Sit down." "Here's the soap." "Wash your arm."
- Use other cues to remind the person what to do, such as the "watch-me" technique where you demonstrate the action, putting your hand over the person's hand, gently guiding the washing actions.
- Use a tub bench or bath chair that can adjust to different heights so the person can sit while showering, if easier.
- Washing the person's hair may be the most difficult task. Use a washcloth to reduce the amount of water on the person's face.
- Be sure the person's genital areas are washed, especially if incontinence is a problem, as well as between folds of skin and under the breasts.

Simplify the process.

- Sew pockets into washcloths to hold soap.
- Use an all-purpose gel to wash both hair and body.
- Use a nylon net sponge, which requires less work to make suds.

Consider bathing alternatives.

- Be open to adjusting your bathing standards. Your preferences regarding bathing may not match the needs or realities of the person for whom you are caring.
- Shampoo hair at another time or on a different day.
- Give the person a sponge bath with a washcloth between showers or baths.
- Use a non-rinse soap product with warm, wet towels to clean the person. Research shows that regular, thorough use of this type of product, which can be purchased at a pharmacy or drug store, is equally effective.
- Have a trained caregiver or nursing assistant come to the house to bathe the person.

Remember after-bath care.

- Check for rashes and sores, especially if the person is incontinent or unable to move around.
- Seat the person while drying and putting on fresh clothes.
- Make sure the person is completely dry. Pat the person dry instead of rubbing.
- Gently apply lotion to keep skin soft.
- Use cornstarch or talcum powder under the breasts and in the creases and folds of skin. If the person will not use deodorant, use baking soda.

Make the bathroom safe.

- Provide supervision as needed in the bathroom, especially if the person is unsteady.
- Lower the thermostat on your hot water heater to prevent scalding injuries.
- Always check the water temperature, even if the person draws their own bath.
- Place a nonskid mat in the tub or shower.
- Install grab bars and use a seat in the tub or shower.
- Make sure there are no puddles on the bathroom floor.

Visit alz.org/caregiving to learn more.

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