

Visiting Someone with Alzheimer's Disease

Visiting allows you and the person with Alzheimer's disease to enjoy the company of others. As the caregiver, you can assist family and friends with ideas to make visits meaningful, comfortable, and to use communication techniques, which will enhance their interactions with the person.

Often times people may hesitate to spend time with the person with Alzheimer's because they worry about not knowing what to do or say. Others may not understand the behavior changes that are caused by the disease and feel uncomfortable about visiting.

By working through the concerns of friends and family members, you can continue to give yourself and the person with Alzheimer's an important social outlet. Here are some tips to assist you in having visitors to your home and visiting outside of your home.

Invite visitors to your home

- Don't wait for friends and family to ask if they may stop by for a visit. Instead, take the initiative to contact them and explain that while Alzheimer's disease has changed your lives in some ways, you value their friendship and support and want it to continue. Then suggest a time when they might come over.
- Plan for a successful visit. While the visit certainly doesn't need to be perfect, it should be relaxing and comfortable for everyone.
- Inform visitors about the person's changes in behavior and memory. Mention that the person may fidget or ask the same questions repeatedly.
- Clarify the purpose of the visit. Some people are reluctant to visit because they don't want to be drawn into the responsibilities of caregiving. Be sure to mention that the purpose of the visit is purely social and not to relieve you of caregiving. Make sure that visitors know that their time is a momentary gift of love to the person and a gift of support to you.

- Suggest specific activities such as taking the person to lunch, sitting on the porch, taking a walk, or looking through a photograph album together.
- Remain accessible to visitors. If you're close by, visitors can share specific questions or problems with you. Visitors also may want the chance to talk to you.
- Adjust the nature of the visit to the visitor. Some visitors feel they must do or bring something in order to make the visit worthwhile. You may want to suggest that these visitors bring flowers or special cards.
- Schedule visits when the person's mood and attention are at their best. For example, it may be better for some people with dementia to have morning visits while others may benefit from afternoon visits.
- Be patient with people, and encourage them to be patient with the person with dementia. Even people in such caring professions as social work or pastoral care may have difficulty coming to terms with Alzheimer's. Some people whom you thought you could depend on may avoid you, while others may rally to your side. Try not to take negative reactions personally.

Visiting others' homes

- Prepare your host or hostess. You may want to explain that your visit may be short or that in the middle of it, you may need to take a walk or shift the person's focus to another activity. You may want to bring along a favorite album, book or audiotape to help occupy the person.
- Take pictures of friends and relatives to preserve a happy memory for yourself and the person.

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continued

Visiting the nursing home

- Get acquainted with the staff. Ask questions about special problems or changes involving the person with Alzheimer's. For example, the activity therapist may help provide you with suggestions for new activities of interest to the person.
- Get to know other residents. Your frequent visits to the nursing home bring you into contact with many residents who may not know you personally, but may appreciate your presence.
- Depending on your time constraints, you may want to get involved with other nursing home activities, such as becoming a member of a family council, a group which works with the nursing home staff.
- Prepare friends and family members for nursing home visits. Explain how the person's condition has changed and how long of a visit he or she can handle. Also suggest simple activities such as giving the person a simple gift, putting lotion on his or her hands, or reading a poem or story aloud.
- Ask visitors to leave a card or note when they have visited, or provide a guest book in the person's room that they can sign. Nursing home staff may not remember who has visited in your absence. If you know visitors' names and the times of their visits you can thank them.
- Time departures when they are engaged in something else. For example, visit before a meal and when they begin eating, say your goodbyes and that you will see them later.
- Time visits on their good times rather than just what is convenient.

Visiting the doctor's office

- Before a doctor visit, advise office staff that the person has dementia and their attention span may be short and ask if time spent in the waiting room can be limited. Ask if you may wait in an empty room, ask about parking, distance to the building and accessibility of stairs and elevators.
- Be assertive about appointment times. Insist on an appointment during the "best times," for the person based on their routine. If the staff knows the situation, they may be willing to give you an appointment when the office is less crowded or noisy. Consider calling the office before you leave the house to check if the doctor is on time.
- Never leave the person alone in a waiting room. Consider taking a third person with you who can drive and help keep the person occupied. It is helpful to offer extra reassurance to the person with Alzheimer's because he or she is away from the familiar environment.
- Even if you plan ahead, you may have to wait longer than expected. Handle the person's hunger by bringing along nutritious snacks. Keep the person busy by playing with a deck of cards, looking at a magazine, or taking a stroll down the hall. Don't worry if the person fidgets or paces. His or her anxiety is normal.
- Use common sense in preparing the person for the visit. Instead of providing an elaborate explanation, simply say, "We're going to see Dr. Jones today." If the person with Alzheimer's objects, avoid getting into an argument by offering a positive suggestion such as, "I need your help in explaining things to the doctor."

alzheimer's  association

6/20/18

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The Heart of America Chapter provides programs and services in 66 counties in Kansas and Missouri. These programs and services are made possible thanks to generous donations from individuals, corporations, and foundations. Contributions and donations allow the Chapter to provide supportive services, including care consultations, free of charge to individuals and families.