

Handout for Individuals & Caregivers: Living Alone

Many people live alone. Living in a place that is safe, familiar and comfortable is important to everyone, including people living with dementia. A diagnosis of dementia does not automatically mean that a person is incapable of living alone. Some people may be capable of living safely on their own for some time after the diagnosis. However, others may be at risk and the issue is whether the level of risk can be mitigated to an acceptable level. Strategies are available to help support a person living with dementia who lives alone. As the disease progresses, these strategies often need to be reviewed and modified to meet the person's changing abilities.

DECIDING IF THE PERSON LIVING WITH DEMENTIA SHOULD CONTINUE LIVING ALONE

Ultimately, people living with dementia need to live somewhere that best supports both their safety and quality of life. For some, this may mean living at home alone with support services, even if there is some risk.

People living with dementia may be concerned that a move away from their home means a loss of independence and control in their daily lives. A person's home offers the person living with dementia the opportunity to follow regular routines in a familiar environment and surrounded by a familiar neighbourhood. With some additional safeguards and support, this may continue to be a safe place for them to live. In fact, sometimes moving the person from a familiar environment and routine has risks also. The individual may have difficulty in adjusting to the new setting and experience worsening confusion, isolation and low mood which may result a decline in their functional abilities.

When deciding if a person living with dementia is able to continue living alone, it is important to engage the person in these conversations and decisions, whenever possible, enabling them to make choices to the best of their abilities. The ability of the person to appreciate and have insight into the consequences of the decision must be taken into consideration. This may require a formal assessment of the person's competency and engagement of the individuals substitute decision maker and family members.

It is important to remember that individuals living with dementia are all different and have unique strengths and weakness. An individualized plan concerning living arrangements should be regularly reviewed and updated.

Handout for Individuals & Caregivers: Living Alone

Questions to help guide your decision

- Can the person living with dementia still do most regular daily activities without assistance? For example:
 - Can the person remember to eat regular meals or to re-heat meals?
 - Is the person able to maintain a healthy weight?
 - Is the person able to store foods properly? Are foods spoiling?
 - Can the person handle day-to-day financial transactions, such as keeping track of bills and paying bills promptly?
 - Are there safeguards to reduce the risk of financial exploitation or abuse?
 - If sick, would the person be able to understand and take appropriate action, such as calling for help?
 - Is the person able to take care of personal hygiene, such as bathing and toileting?
 - Does the person have physical and social stimulation during the day?
 - Is the person able to monitor and manage daily medications?
- If not, would some adaptations, aids or intermittent assistance enable them to carryout those activities?
- Is the person able to understand and appreciate the consequences of their actions?
- Is it still felt by others that it is safe for the person to live alone?
- Think about the risks and benefits of the person living alone against having home support services or moving to an assisted care environment.
- Is there enough support available to help the person live alone? Learn about support services available in your community.
- In an emergency situation, such as a fire, would the person be able to call for help or have the ability to leave their home without assistance?
- Does the person pose a risk to others (e.g., does the person live in an apartment and regularly cause fires with the stove or cigarettes)?
- If the person had an accident, such as a fall, do they have the physical and cognitive ability to get to a safe place or to use an alert system to call for help?
- Is a home safety assessment needed?

Handout for Individuals & Caregivers: Living Alone

STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE INDEPENDENT LIVING

The following strategies can help balance safety and quality of life, making independent living a safe living arrangement for as long as possible. Consider incorporating these changes slowly to give the person time to adjust.

Promote safety

- **Leave a set of house keys** with trusted neighbours to ensure access to the home if help is needed. Neighbours may not always be at home; leave a set of keys with two different neighbours.
- **Arrange for someone to call or visit once a day**, as regular checks can reassure the person as well as the family. These visits can be timed to help ensure that the person eats or takes medication.
- **Register with the MedicAlert® Safely Home® program.** It will help first responders identify the person who is lost and assist in a safe return home. Some people may find it hard to accept that they are at risk of getting lost and may refuse to wear a bracelet. Consider another MedicAlert® product such as a watch or sports band.
- **Consider appliance safety measures** to minimize the chance of an accident. These can include an automatic shut off kettle, lowering the temperature of the hot water heater or removing stove fuses and knobs, putting burners on timers or shutting off the gas.
- **Post a visible, easy to read list of emergency phone numbers.** Consider adding a picture beside each name and telephone number for a visual cue for person living with dementia.
- **Purchase an alert button** that can detect falls and allows the person to call for help in an emergency situation. Consider products that alert when no motion is detected.

Food and Nutrition

- **Register for Meals on Wheels** or other community support programs such as community dining, or delivery of fresh fruit and vegetable baskets. It will ensure delivery of a nutritious hot meal once a day and an opportunity to socialize at community dining programs. Consider delivery of frozen meals on wheels which can be eaten at any time.
- **Monitor if food has been eaten or stored properly.** When visiting the person, look to see if their food is stored properly or if it is spoiling.

Handout for Individuals & Caregivers: Living Alone

- **Provide prompts to eat.** Time a phone call with a reminder to eat. Consider having a neighbour or a support worker drop by to share a meal with the person.
- **Grocery delivery services** (online or by telephone). These services can be costly and require internet access and familiarity with technology. Consider having a friend or relative order for the person.
- **Opt for lower-risk appliances** such as a toaster oven or microwave for heating food. When choosing an appliance, ensure that that it is simple and easy to use.
- **Use prepared foods**, non-perishable foods and foods that do not need to be stored in a refrigerator. This makes preparation is easier and less concern about spoilage.

Medication use

- **Simplify medication routines.** Consider a pill dispenser or a blister pack prepared by a pharmacist, which allows only a small supply of pills at once and helps person take the pills on the right day and time. It is easy to keep track of whether medication doses are missed. However, there are possibilities for confusion about day and time. In addition, may not prevent person from taking extra medication, if more than one day's supply is available.
- **Have someone visit to give pills.**
- When visiting the person make it a habit to **check their medication.** If possible, give them the medication yourself.

Finance management

- **Set up direct deposit of cheques and automatic withdrawal** for bill payments.
- **Make someone else, such as a substitute decision-maker or Power of Attorney, responsible for handling finances**, such as writing cheques, paying bills, monitoring accounts. This will allow person to manage finances with some independence yet provides protection.
- **Encourage the use of bank-at-home services** (telephone or on-line). However, the person may not be able to understand their finances and this strategy does not protect them from scams or overpayment/non-payment of bills.
- **Consider giving the person money** on a weekly or monthly basis to provide them with some independence.
- **Limit access to credit cards** and consider making the bank manager aware of the person's dementia.

Handout for Individuals & Caregivers: Living Alone

- **Talk about finances as early** in the disease process as you can. Person may be resistant to new methods or having someone help with finances.

Falls Prevention

- **Ensure that there is good lighting.** Make sure that each room has enough light and reduce dark areas and shadows.
- **Clear walking paths** inside the home by removing clutter and tripping hazards, such as a loose rug or electrical cords. Ensure that there are no dips in walkways outside the home or uneven ground.
- **Purchase safe footwear.** Shoes that have velcro fastenings are a good option as they are easy to take on and off.
- **Place night lights** throughout the home for when the person needs to go to the bathroom or kitchen during the night.
- **Install railings** inside and outside the house and grab bars in the bathroom for extra support.
- **Use non-slip bathmats** and place non-slip strips in the bath/shower. Avoid using a dark colour bathmat, as it could be mistaken for a hole.
- **Remove soap build-up** in the tub or shower on a regular basis to avoid slipping.

Daily living

- **Get help with practical tasks**, such as housekeeping and meal preparation. It ensures someone is in the home to supervise activity, provide companionship, and to accomplish the tasks. However, person living with dementia may be reluctant to accept help.
- **Give the person as much independence as possible.** Try cuing the person first before providing hands-on assistance.
- **Get help for managing personal care**, either through agency support or friends/family. Try to arrange for consistent workers; this will make it easier to build a working relationship between care provider and person living with dementia.
- **Day programs** may help the person remain an active member of his/her community and provide physical and mental stimulation. Evidence shows that staying socially active may help slow down the progression of functional decline associated with dementia and allow individuals to live independently for a longer period of time

Handout for Individuals & Caregivers: Living Alone

STAYING ALONE AT HOME TEMPORARY (SHORT TERM OR LONG TERM)

There may be times when persons living with dementia stay alone at home for a short period of time (e.g. a couple of hours) or for a longer period (e.g. several days or a week).

For partners in care, it is important to keep in mind, these practices are meant to enable independence rather than over-protect persons living with dementia for the goal of safety.

Maintaining open communication is essential. Below are some practices to help persons living with dementia stay safe while alone.

- Write down partner in care's information on a whiteboard or in an established location (e.g., where they are, telephone number, when they will return).
- Have someone check-in in the morning and at night for medication reminders and make sure things everything is okay.
- Find out if there are any local "check-in" services available in your region.
- Have enough convenient or microwaveable food or arrange food delivery.
- Communicate the normal routine with family members so that they do not check-in when the person with dementia might be away.
- Set up speed dial if necessary or make a list of contacts for any emergency situations.
- Have emergency systems in place if necessary (e.g., 3-3-3-3 plan as previously described).
- Let the neighbours know.
- Consider establishing a sign or signal that will let your neighbours know if you need help, such as flashing a light or opening and closing curtains or blinds.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- A By Us For Us Guide: Living Safely the-ria.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/BUFUGuide-Living-Safely_AODA.pdf
- The Stages of Alzheimer's Disease alzheimer.ca/en/about-dementia/what-alzheimersdisease/stages-alzheimers-disease
- Local Alzheimer Society www.alzheimer.ca/helpnearyou or call 1-800-616-8816
- The MedicAlert® Safely Home® program www.medicalert.ca/safelyhome

Handout for Individuals & Caregivers: Living Alone

- Dementia and Personal Care www.alzheimer.ca/personalcare
- Driving and Dementia
alzheimer.ca/sites/default/files/documents/conversations_driving.pdf
- A Guide to Programs and Services for Seniors in Ontario
www.homecareontario.ca/docs/default-source/default-documentlibrary/seniors_guide_final_english_web.pdf?sfvrsn=2

REFERENCES

1. Brender, F., Gutoskie, H., Hopewell, R., & Hounam, B. (2014). A By Us For Us Guide: Living safely. Retrieved from the-ria.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/BUFU-Guide-Living-Safely_AODA.pdf
2. Alzheimer Society of Canada. (2018). Dementia and living alone. Retrieved from archive.alzheimer.ca/sites/default/files/files/national/brochuresconversations/conversations-about-dementia-and-living-alone.pdf