



Creating a Personal Care Routine

For Someone Living with Dementia

A guide for families and carers

Why personal care becomes harder

One of the biggest changes families notice after a loved one develops dementia is that everyday personal care becomes more difficult. Simple activities such as getting dressed, brushing teeth, showering or washing hands can suddenly become confusing, frustrating or even frightening.

Many carers ask:

"Why won't Mum have a shower anymore?"

"Dad keeps saying he already brushed his teeth."

"Why is getting dressed such a battle every morning?"

The answer is usually not because the person is being difficult. Dementia changes the way the brain understands everyday tasks. Something that once happened automatically may now require many separate decisions, and that can feel overwhelming.

The good news is that a calm, predictable routine can make personal care much easier for everyone.

Why routines matter

People living with dementia often feel safer when they know what comes next. A familiar routine helps reduce confusion and anxiety because there are fewer surprises during the day.

It also helps carers by creating consistency and making it easier to notice changes in health or behaviour.

Gentle reminder: Routines should provide reassurance — not become strict timetables. Every day will be different, and flexibility is important.

A gentle daily routine

Morning

- ☐ Open curtains and let in natural light.
- ☐ Greet your loved one warmly using their preferred name.
- ☐ Offer a drink of water before breakfast.
- ☐ Assist with using the toilet if needed.
- ☐ Wash face and hands.
- ☐ Brush teeth or clean dentures.
- ☐ Brush or comb hair.
- ☐ Shave if appropriate.
- ☐ Apply moisturiser if needed.
- ☐ Encourage dressing in comfortable clothes.
- ☐ Eat breakfast together.
- ☐ Take morning medications.

A relaxed start to the day often sets the tone for everything that follows.

Mid-morning

- ☐ Gentle walk outside.
- ☐ Gardening.
- ☐ Looking through family photographs.
- ☐ Listening to favourite music.
- ☐ Folding washing.
- ☐ Simple household tasks.
- ☐ Morning tea.

Light activity helps maintain mobility while providing opportunities for conversation and connection.

Lunch

- ☐ Encourage fluids.
- ☐ Eat together whenever possible.
- ☐ Allow plenty of time.
- ☐ Check that dentures are comfortable and glasses are clean.

Never rush meals.

Afternoon

- ☐ Quiet activities.
- ☐ Reading.
- ☐ Jigsaw puzzles.
- ☐ Family visits.
- ☐ Watching birds.
- ☐ Rest if needed.

Late afternoon is often when fatigue increases, so quieter activities usually work best.

Evening

- ☐ Dinner.
- ☐ Evening medications.
- ☐ Toilet before bed.
- ☐ Wash face and hands.
- ☐ Brush teeth or clean dentures.
- ☐ Change into nightwear.
- ☐ Gentle conversation or favourite music.
- ☐ Bedtime at a consistent hour.

A calm evening routine may help reduce late-day confusion and restlessness.

Tips that make personal care easier

Give one instruction at a time

Instead of saying:

"Let's have a shower, brush your teeth, get dressed and then we'll have breakfast."

Try:

"Let's walk to the bathroom." Then: "Here's your toothbrush."

Breaking tasks into small steps makes them easier to understand.

Avoid asking too many questions

Questions can feel overwhelming. Instead of "Do you want to brush your teeth?" try "Here's your toothbrush. I'll brush mine too." Or offer a simple choice: "Would you like the blue towel or the white towel?" Small choices help maintain independence without creating confusion.

Keep the bathroom comfortable

Many people dislike cold bathrooms. Try to:

- Warm the room.
- Prepare towels beforehand.
- Check the water temperature.
- Reduce loud noises.
- Improve lighting.
- Use non-slip mats.

Feeling physically comfortable makes personal care much easier.

Maintain privacy and dignity

Allow your loved one to do as much as they can independently. Cover parts of the body not being washed. Explain what you're doing before you help. Never rush. Small gestures of respect help preserve dignity.

Make it familiar

People living with dementia often respond well to familiar routines and familiar belongings. Use their favourite soap, their usual toothbrush, familiar towels, and the same order of activities each day. Consistency builds confidence.

Use encouragement, not correction

If your loved one says "I've already brushed my teeth," avoid arguing. Instead try "Let's freshen up together before breakfast." Or "I'll do mine if you do yours." If they refuse, try again gently later. A gentle invitation often works better than a debate — you will not win an argument when they believe what their brain is telling them.

Watch for signs of discomfort

If someone suddenly refuses personal care, ask yourself — could they be:

- In pain? Often they cannot express that they are in pain.
- Too cold or tired?
- Embarrassed?
- Afraid of slipping?
- Sensitive to the water temperature?
- Experiencing sore gums or a toothache?

Addressing the underlying problem is often more effective than insisting they continue.

Accept that some days will be different

There will be mornings when everything goes smoothly, and days when a shower simply isn't possible. That's okay.

***Gentle reminder:** Monitor extreme behaviour change — it may be caused by a urinary tract infection, which needs urgent medical attention. Also monitor skin condition, particularly in areas that may have urine or faeces on them, and pressure points from sitting or lying too long. Any redness that doesn't fade needs assessment by a nurse or doctor.*

Practical wisdom from experience

A sponge bath, washing the face and hands, changing clothes or brushing hair may be enough until another opportunity arises. The goal is to support comfort and wellbeing — not perfection.

Make sure the bathroom is very warm before they enter, as older people often feel the cold. Warm their clothes and towel too if possible.

Have a couple of flannels or washcloths ready. If you are assisting, give them one for themselves so they feel some independence. Use a light-coloured cloth for the face and upper body, and a darker cloth for the lower body and private areas. After the bottom has been cleaned, throw the used washcloth to the floor or somewhere out of reach so it can't be used again on the face — because that's often exactly where it will go next!

Watch for a twinkle in their eye, or accidental shower spray leaving the shower and wetting you or making the floor slippery. Keep a drying mop handy for after the shower. Avoiding slips and falls should be a top priority — a broken hip can take away independence permanently.

***Gentle reminder:** A shower during the day, when it's warmer, is often easier. After a messy meal they may be more willing to change a shirt and wash — and may as well have a shower. A small reward afterwards (frozen yoghurt with fruit puree?) can help. Try changing the subject and singing or dancing your way to the bathroom.*

When they resist

Your loved one may put up a fight, or even scream, as 'unknown people' try to undress them and put them in the shower. Some people never presented naked to their partners through their life, and it can be very uncomfortable to have strangers in the bathroom.

Some people with dementia also have hallucinations — imagining cats, children or men in the bathroom — and they certainly are not going to get undressed in front of them. If they become distressed at wash time, it helps for a family member or friend to be in the bathroom too. Something familiar about you may be comforting. You know their ways and preferences, and you can decide when it's time to stop so there isn't too much distress.

Being there with paid carers also means you know your loved one isn't being hurt — they're just fighting the process. Unfortunately, you may be the one who receives the pinches and punches, as paid help cannot put themselves in danger.

Little opportunities

If possible, keep a soft nail brush and nail scissors handy and make the most of any opportunity to tidy up nails. And teeth — so many people with dementia refuse to brush their teeth. Try a really soft brush, even a child's brush, or a novelty one — anything they may try, in or out of the shower.

If you can't get them to wash their hair, there are special dry shampoos on the market you can use outside the shower.

***Gentle reminder:** Don't be disgusted, or embarrassed by their behaviour or reluctance to be clean. Their brain is letting them down. It is their disease — not them. Carers deal with this all the time and do not think poorly of your loved one, or you.*

A weekly personal care checklist

Use this checklist to help keep track of important tasks. It isn't about judging success — it's a gentle reminder that helps families notice patterns and celebrate small progress.

Task	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Shower or bath	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Brush teeth (morning)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Brush teeth (evening)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hair brushed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Shave (if required)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Clean clothes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Moisturiser applied	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Nails checked	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Looking after yourself

Supporting someone with personal care is one of the most physically and emotionally demanding parts of caring. If you're finding it difficult, remember that help is available.

Community nursing services, home care providers, occupational therapists and respite services can offer practical support and advice. Accepting help doesn't mean you've failed — it means you're making sure both you and your loved one receive the support you need.

Final thoughts

A personal care routine isn't about following a rigid schedule. It's about creating a day that feels familiar, calm and respectful.

Small routines — brushing teeth together, laying out clothes the night before, breakfast at the same time each morning, or ending the day with a favourite song — can make personal care less stressful and more enjoyable.

***Gentle reminder:** Above all, remember that the person you are caring for deserves kindness, patience and dignity. What matters most isn't whether every task is completed — it's that your loved one feels safe, respected, comfortable and cared for. Sometimes the greatest success isn't a perfect routine, but sharing a smile, a laugh or a quiet moment together.*