

Equipment to help with disability

There are many different types of equipment that may enable people with dementia to remain independent for longer or make it easier for others to give support. Of course, each person with dementia is very different. What may be useful for one person at a particular stage may not be appropriate for another. Seek advice.

Points to consider

- People with dementia may find it harder to learn new skills or adjust to new ways of doing things owing to gradual loss of memory or other abilities such as concentration. It is helpful if any equipment that involves learning can be introduced at an early stage in the illness.
- Dementia in the later stages may lead to unsteadiness in walking and loss of co-ordination. You will need professional advice on what equipment may be most helpful.
- Many people with dementia have other disabilities, such as problems with sight or hearing, that may add to their difficulties. You will need professional advice from someone who understands dementia on the most appropriate equipment for these disabilities.

Advice: how professionals can help

Seek advice from professionals as soon as possible, particularly when considering acquiring any major piece of equipment.

Occupational therapist (OT)

- An OT can advise on equipment and useful strategies to assist someone with dementia with everyday activities such as washing and dressing.
- As the dementia progresses, the OT can advise on appropriate ways to cope with the changes.
- OTs work in both health and social services. You can contact an OT through the GP or hospital consultant, or through social services.

Chartered physiotherapist

A chartered physiotherapist can advise on mobility aids, such as walking frames and wheelchairs, and on safe ways of helping someone with dementia to move.

Those attending a hospital can ask to speak to a physiotherapist based there. Otherwise, ask the GP for a referral to a hospital physiotherapy department.

District nurse

A district nurse can advise on the kind of equipment needed for nursing someone at home. Contact the district nurse through your GP surgery or health centre.

Continence adviser

A continence adviser can advise on problems relating to incontinence and give information on a range of aids. Most areas have a continence adviser. Ask your GP.

Types of equipment

Items that you may wish to consider during different stages of the dementia include:

- Memory aids, such as clocks with large faces or noticeboards for messages
- Aids for washing and for using the toilet, such as bath seats or raised toilet seats
- Aids for eating and drinking, such as specially adapted cutlery or non-spill cups
- Mobility aids, including walking frames and wheelchairs
- Safety devices - for example, gas detectors
- Aids to help the person take medication, such as boxes with a pill compartment for each day of the week
- Nursing equipment, including bedpans or pressure relief mattresses.

Equipment is not always the answer. It may be enough to make small changes in the way that daily activities are organised.

Where to get equipment

Equipment may be available through health or social services, or through shops and other specialised sources.

What social services can provide

Social services are sometimes able to provide equipment to help with everyday activities around the home. Arrangements vary in different areas.

Such equipment may include raised toilet seats, grab rails, adapted cutlery and special chairs. There may be a charge. Make sure you ask first.

Social services will first carry out an assessment to decide whether the person needs equipment. This assessment will normally be carried out by an occupational therapist (see above). Anyone with a diagnosis of dementia is entitled to an assessment under the NHS and Community Care Act 1990. Contact social services to find out the arrangements in your area.

If the wait for an assessment or for equipment is longer than seems reasonable you can use the social services' complaints procedure. Social services will explain how to do this.

What the health service can provide

Equipment to aid mobility, such as walking sticks, zimmer frames and wheelchairs, can be provided on long term loan by the NHS. You can arrange this through the GP, hospital consultant or physiotherapist. There is no charge for such equipment but there may be a returnable deposit.

Wheelchairs, which are available from your local wheelchair service, are usually standard models. The NHS will pay for servicing and repairs providing these are not due to misuse or neglect.

Some health authorities offer voucher schemes towards the cost of a more expensive wheelchair. Ask your wheelchair service.

Equipment needed for nursing someone at home, such as bedpans, pressure relief mattresses or hoists, should be available on free loan from your community health service. The district nurse will assess the need for such equipment.

If you have a complaint about equipment you can write to your local health authority or trust.

Buying privately

You may wish to buy privately if the equipment you want is not available from health or social services or if the wait is too long.

Before buying, try to see the equipment and seek professional advice.

Check the following points as appropriate:

- Is it easy to use?
- Are spare parts easily obtainable? Are they expensive?
- Does the equipment need regular servicing? Who pays for this?

- Is it safe? Equipment tested and approved by the British Standards Institution will have the BSI kitemark or safety mark. You may also see a CE mark on some products. This means they conform to European safety standards.

If you are buying equipment specially designed to help with disability, such as a wheelchair, it should be exempt from VAT. Ask before buying.

You can buy equipment from many different sources.

- Many suppliers run mail order services.
- Some items may be available from local shops, such as pharmacists.
- Sometimes the best 'equipment' may be a simple household item from an ordinary shop, such as a noticeboard for reminders or velcro fastenings for clothes.

If you are not happy with equipment you have bought, get in touch with the shop or supplier as quickly as possible to see if they can arrange to exchange the item or offer a refund.

Hiring equipment

It may be worth considering hiring equipment that you only need on a short term basis.

- Your local British Red Cross centre may hire or lend wheelchairs and other items. Their address will be in the phone book, or ask at your local library.
- You may be able to hire a range of equipment from specialist hire companies and from some manufacturers and suppliers. Ask the Disabled Living Foundation or your nearest disabled living centre for details (see below).

Helpful organisations

Alzheimer's Society

Branches of the Alzheimer's Society may be able to give you helpful local contacts and may have tips on equipment that people have found useful. Ring the national helpline (0845 300 0336) for contact details of your local branch.

Age Concern England

Age Concern publishes a helpful fact sheet Disability equipment and how to get it. For a free copy contact:

Age Concern
Freepost (SW30375)
Ashburton
Devon TQ3 7ZZ

Freephone: 0800 009966

You can also telephone Age Concern's free advice line on 0808 808 6060 to discuss equipment.

DIAL UK

DIAL (Disablement Information and Advice Line) is a network of over 140 local groups throughout the UK providing information on a range of issues connected with disability, including equipment. Contact DIAL UK to see if there is an advice line serving your area. DIAL centres are run by people with personal experience of disability. Most advice workers are volunteers.

DIAL UK
St Catherine's
Tickhill Road
Doncaster DN4 8QN

Telephone: 013 0231 0123
Fax: 013 0231 0404
Email: enquiries@dialuk.org.uk

Disabled Living Centres

There are a number of disabled and independent living centres throughout the country. These provide advice and information on a range of equipment. Some centres will also display and demonstrate equipment. For details of your nearest centre contact:

Disabled Living Centres Council
Redbank House
4 St Chad's Street
Cheetham
Manchester M8 8QA

Telephone: 016 1834 1044
Email: dlcc@dlcc.org.uk

Disabled Living Foundation (DLF)

The DLF is a national charity whose staff can provide information and advice on equipment relating to disability and on other charities, self-help groups and equipment suppliers by letter or phone. In some cases they may also be able to suggest easier ways of doing things. If English is not your first language you may write in your own language and they will reply in that language.

You can also arrange to visit the DLF centre to look at equipment and talk to staff.

Disabled Living Foundation (DLF)
380-384 Harrow Road
London W9 2HU

Telephone: 020 7289 6111

Helpline: 0845 130 9177 (weekdays 10am-1pm; all calls charged at local rate)

Minicom line: 0870 603 9176

Home Improvement Agencies

Home improvement agencies, also known by names such as Care and Repair or Staying Put, offer free advice and information to older and disabled homeowners who want to stay in their own homes but may need specialist equipment or adaptations in order to do so. There are over 200 home improvement agencies at present. To find out if there is one in your local authority contact:

- England: Foundations, Bleaklow House, Howard Town Mill, Glossop, Derbyshire SK13 8HT
Telephone 01457 891 909
- Wales: Care and Repair Cymru, Norbury House, Norbury Road, Fairwater, Cardiff CF5 3AS
Telephone 029 20576 286
- Northern Ireland: Staying Put Department, Fold Housing Trust, 3-6 Redburn Square,
Holywood, County Down, Northern Ireland BT18 9HZ Telephone 028 90428 314.

Anchor Staying Put manages over 50 agencies throughout England. To find out whether they operate in your area, see <http://www.stayingput.org.uk/> or telephone 0191 2706068.

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