

# Help your loved ones with memory disorders practice healthy living

If you have a loved one who has been diagnosed with dementia or Alzheimer's disease, you likely are aware that these types of diseases progressively attack the brain, causing confusion and cognitive decline—decline in our ability to think, reason and communicate.

But have you considered how a memory disorder might impact your loved one's physical well-being?

Just because someone is living with a memory disorder doesn't mean their physical health has to suffer. Caregivers can help their loved ones maintain physical wellness, while taking into consideration the unique challenges that seniors with Alzheimer's may be facing.

Here are some examples of these challenges and how you, as a caregiver, can help your loved one continue to live a healthy lifestyle.

- **EXERCISE:** Seniors already experience changes to their bodies associated with normal aging such as diminished vision, hearing loss and being more susceptible to falls. However, people with memory disorders are at even higher risk of falling down due to decreased coordination and spatial awareness. Encourage your loved one to maintain regular exercise to build muscle strength, improve balance and endurance, and ultimately, decrease the risk of falling and injuring themselves.
- **NUTRITION:** People with Alzheimer's may not drink enough water or eat enough food to stay healthy as a result of confusion and memory loss. Support your loved one by offering juice, water and nutritious snacks throughout the day to keep them nourished. Consider asking them or keeping track of the foods they like and dislike and offer them their favorite meals or snacks to ensure they maintain a regular eating schedule.
- **COMMUNICATION:** Memory disorders make it harder for people to communicate when they are sick, or if something has changed in their bodies. If you notice sudden changes in mood or behavior in a loved one, it could be a sign of a discomfort or a physical health issue like a UTI, sinus infection or dental problem. Don't assume a change in temperament is part of the disease, and check for sources of pain that might not be as obvious, such as the feet. If you're concerned, don't hesitate to schedule a visit with their doctor.

83 percent of the help provided to older adults in the United States comes from family members, friends or other unpaid caregivers. Nearly half of all caregivers who provide help to older adults do so for someone living with Alzheimer's or another dementia.



- **EMOTIONAL HEALTH:** Seniors with memory disorders are frequently diagnosed with depression and can experience sadness and loneliness. To support emotional health, caregivers can plan activities and outings for their loved ones to help keep them engaged. Remember to check in frequently to see how they're doing – even a quick phone call can help brighten their day! Also, encourage them to take short “sunshine breaks,” as going outside for just ten minutes on a sunny day will provide a sufficient dose of Vitamin D while helping to boost their mood.
- **PERSONAL CARE AND HYGIENE:** Maintaining self-hygiene can be challenging for individuals with Alzheimer's, so they often rely on caregivers for assistance with bathing, changing clothes, brushing teeth and hair, and other acts of personal care. Support your loved one by approaching the topic of self-care with a positive attitude; providing simple choices; using life stories to make a connection; and being kind and supportive while protecting their dignity and privacy.

Seniors with memory disorders often need support and encouragement to maintain a healthy lifestyle. By being aware of the key factors above, you will be well-equipped to help your loved one continue healthy living habits.

### **Before you communicate, you may consider:**

- Is it quiet, with good lighting and without too many distractions?
- Do you have their full attention?
- Is your body language open and relaxed?
- Sit close and make eye contact. Speak clearly and calmly.

