

JAMA Patient Page:

Caring for Loved Ones Who Are Mentally Impaired

Caring for loved ones experiencing dementia (impairment of memory and judgment and sometimes personality changes due to a brain disease) or other severe mental impairments presents unique problems for the caregiver.

People who have mental impairments due to Alzheimer's disease, stroke, head injury or other brain disorders can become confused or disoriented and have memory problems and behavioral problems. Caring for them and keeping them healthy and safe can be difficult, but ultimately rewarding.

An article in the July 5, 2000, issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association* (Morrison et al) discusses the need to prevent pain and discomfort and minimize burdensome treatments for patients over 70 years old in the last stages of dementia.

Keeping Your Loved One Safe

- Supervise or limit the use of potentially hazardous equipment or appliances, such as stoves, knives, scissors, mixing machines, blenders, barbecue grills and lawn mowers.
- Supervise and record the taking of medication.
- Supervise eating.
- Supervise and assist with bathing; monitor the water temperature.
- Supervise smoking and alcohol use.
- Restrict consumption of caffeine if the person is having difficulty sleeping or is overly agitated.
- Have him or her wear a wrist bracelet with his or her name, address and telephone number.

Create a Safe Environment

- Use safety devices, such as childproof locks and doorknobs, for places where potentially hazardous material and equipment, such as stoves, knives, scissors, cleaning fluids and appliances, are stored.
- Lock or otherwise block access to areas that may be hazardous.
- Make sure entries, landings, stairways, bathrooms and areas between rooms are well-lit.
- Put non-skid contrasting colored rugs in front of doors or steps to help the individual anticipate staircases and room entrances.
- Install grab bars and decals designed to make surfaces non-skid in bathtub and shower areas; if possible install a walk-in shower.
- Remove objects and furniture that are unstable or may cause a fall such as magazine racks, throw rugs, coffee tables and floor lamps.
- Remove locks from doors, such as the bathroom door, that cannot be unlocked from the outside.

Keeping Your Loved One Healthy

- Provide a healthy diet.
- Encourage movement and exercise to promote health and help reduce anxiety, agitation and restlessness.
- Allow participation in your daily activities, if possible, such as folding laundry or preparing a meal.
- Reassure and orient the person (explain where they are and, in some cases, who you are) if he or she feels confused, lost, abandoned or disoriented.
- Communicate in a clear, calm and supportive manner; turn off the radio or television when communicating to lessen confusion and distraction.

Keep Yourself Healthy

- Arrange for occasional breaks from caregiving responsibility.
- Consider joining a caregiver support group.

For More Information

- Alzheimer's Association
(800) 272-3900
- National Institute on Aging
Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center
(800) 438-4380

Additional Sources: Alzheimer's Association, National Institute on Aging, *The AMA Family Medical Guide*, *The AMA Complete Guide to Women's Health*

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