

BATHING

Although bathing may seem like an easy activity, it is quite complex. A variety of distinctive parts of the brain must work together to complete the task. It is important to remember that changes in a person's bathing habits and interest in personal hygiene may be related to the disease process. Because of changes that take place within the brain, the sensation of hot and cold or the feeling of water itself might change. The steps necessary to take a bath or a shower may become overwhelming and the purpose of bathing or having good hygiene may be forgotten. It may be humiliating for some people to be bathed by someone else or to be reminded to take a bath or a shower.

Whether you discover a specific reason for the person's unease, you can try to make the activity easier and more pleasant. Here are some suggestions that might help.

Preparing for bathing:

- Evaluate the best day and time for bathing. Consider the person's former bathing habits.
- Use the person's own words around bathing. Some people have little sayings that they used in the past about bathing or getting dressed, such as "getting ready to face the day" or "freshen up". Giving them their words back might prompt self-care behaviour.

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- Offer one or two choices such as bath or shower and preferred time.
- Be calm and matter-of-fact. For example, “Ok, your bath is ready.”
- Pull the blinds down and close the door to create a sense of privacy.
- Make the bathroom warm and inviting by playing favourite music and providing adequate lighting.
- Prepare the bath ahead of time: lay out the soap, wash cloth, shampoo, towels and have water already in the tub.

The bathing experience:

- Adjust the water level to the person’s preference. Some people with dementia can only tolerate a few inches of water in the bathtub.
- Help the person feel the water before getting into the tub by dipping a hand in or gently pouring water over their hands. Reassure the person that the water is not too hot or too cold.
- Use coloured bubble bath or a bath mat to make it easier to judge the depth of water (avoid a dark coloured mat - it could give the impression of a hole). Lay a towel or a strip of coloured tape on the tub to distinguish the edge.
- Consider using a hand-held spray attachment on a flexible hose to make rinsing and hair washing easier.
- Respect the need for modesty: allow the person to bathe in underwear or a bathing suit or wrapped in a towel.
- Simplify the task by giving one instruction at a time.

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- Allow the person to do as much of the washing as possible.
- Make bathing a positive experience by praising the person's accomplishments.
- Make sure the person's hands are occupied by providing a washcloth.

Problem-solving:

- If washing hair is part of the problem, separate hair washing from bath time. Try shampoos that don't require water.
- Baths are generally easier to manage and less frightening than showers.
- Try a sponge bath at the sink.
- For people who are very resistant, consider washing a body part each day rather than the whole body every second or third day.
- If the person regularly refuses a bath or sponge bath, consider consulting a physician for possible techniques and/or medications that might help.
- Cover the mirror if the person no longer recognizes his or her own reflection.
- Arrange to have another individual, with whom the person with dementia is comfortable, help with bathing.
- If the person needs convincing about the importance of bathing, try having their physician write bathing "orders" on a prescription pad.

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Important safety considerations:

- Install a railing in the tub to make getting in and out easier.
- Letting the water drain out first may help if the person is afraid of slipping.
- Use a tub chair and shower hose if getting into the tub is a problem.
- Use a non-skid bath mat in the bottom of the tub or shower.
- Avoid bath oils that make the tub or shower slippery.
- Assist the person in and out of the tub.
- Always supervise bathing.

On some days these ideas will make bathing easier. You might prefer that the person with dementia take a shower or bath every day, but you can avoid a lot of stress for both of you by being flexible on the frequency and the method of bathing. It is important to remember that you are doing the best you can.

Resources:

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