

## About bathing

Bathing is one of life's most personal activities; we usually bathe alone. But a person who has Alzheimer's disease may need help. Eventually, someone else may have to bathe the person. This can upset a person who is confused and cannot remember why bathing is important. He or she may feel physically threatened or violated and become angry and afraid. Here are some tips to make bathing the person with dementia easier.

### Know the person's abilities

Encourage the person to do as much as possible, but be ready to help when needed. Assess his or her ability to:

- Find the bathroom.
- See clearly.
- Keep balance without fear of falling.
- Reach and stretch arms.
- Remember steps in the bathing process, follow cues or examples.
- Know how to use different products (soap, shampoo, washcloth, etc.).
- Sense water temperature.

### Prepare the bathroom in advance

- Gather bathing supplies such as towels, washcloths, shampoo and soap before you tell the person that it's time to bathe.
- Make sure the room is warm.
- Use large beach towels or bath blankets that completely wrap around the person for privacy and warmth.
- Have a washcloth ready to cover the person's eyes to prevent stinging from water or shampoo.
- Make sure that soap and shampoo are easy to reach. Try using hotel-sized plastic containers of shampoo.

- Fill the tub and then assess the person's reaction to getting into the water. It may be better to fill the tub after the person is seated.
- Use only two or three inches of water.
- Try using a hand-held showerhead and make sure the spray isn't too intense.
- Monitor the water temperature. The person may not sense when the water is dangerously hot or may resist bathing if the water is too cool.

### Focus on the person, not the task

- Give the person choices. For example, ask if he or she would like to bathe now or in 15 minutes, or take a bath or a shower.
- Try saying "Let's wash up" instead of "Let's take a bath."
- Be aware that the person may perceive bathing to be threatening. If the person resists bathing or acts out, distract him or her and try again later.
- Often praise the person for his or her efforts and cooperation.
- Always protect the person's dignity, privacy and comfort. Try to help the person feel less vulnerable by covering the person with a bath blanket while undressing.
- Cover or remove the mirrors if a reflection in the bathroom mirror leads the person to believe there's a stranger in the room.
- Have a familiar person of the same sex help, if possible.
- Be flexible. Allow the person to get into the tub or shower with clothes on. He or she may want to undress once clothes are wet.
- Pad the shower seat and other cold or uncomfortable surfaces with towels.

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- Have activities ready in case the person becomes agitated. For example, play soothing music or sing together. Or, give the person something to hold, such as a sponge.

### **Adapt the bathing process**

- Set a regular time of day for bathing. If the person usually bathes in the morning, it may confuse him or her to bathe at night.
- Use simple phrases to talk the person through the bathing process, such as: “Put your feet in the tub.” “Sit down.” “Here is the soap.” “Wash your arm.”
- Use other cues to remind the person what to do such as covering the person’s hand with yours to guide washing actions.
- Keep a waterproof chair in the shower and install a hand-held shower device. This way, the person can sit while showering.
- Be sure the person’s genital areas are washed, especially if incontinence is a problem.
- Be sure the person is washed between folds of skin and under the breasts.

### **Simplify the process**

- Sew pockets into washcloths to hold soap.
- Use an all-purpose gel to wash both hair and body.
- Use special soaps that don’t need rinsing.
- Use a nylon net sponge; it takes less work to make suds.

### **Consider bathing alternatives**

- Wash one part of the body each day of the week.
- Try bed baths if the bathroom seems to bring out difficult behavior.
- Consider shampooing at another time or on a different day.
- Alternate a sponge bath with a more complete bath or shower.

### **Remember after-bath care**

- Check for rashes and sores, especially if the person is incontinent or unable to move around.
- Seat the person while drying and putting on fresh clothes.
- Make sure the person is completely dry. Pat the person dry instead of rubbing.
- Use cotton swabs to dry between the toes.
- Apply lotion to keep skin soft.
- Use cornstarch or talcum powder under the breasts and in the creases and folds of skin. If the person won’t use deodorant, use baking soda.

### **Play it safe**

- Never leave the person alone in the bathroom.
- Lower the thermostat on your hot-water heater to prevent scalding injuries.
- Always check the water temperature, even if the person draws his or her own bath.
- Always put a nonskid mat in the tub or shower.
- Install grab bars and use a seat in the tub or shower.
- Make sure there are no puddles on the bathroom floor; think about installing carpet.

The Alzheimer’s Association is fighting on your behalf to give everyone a reason to hope. For more information about Alzheimer research, treatment and care, please contact the Alzheimer’s Association.

Contact Center **1.800.272.3900**

TDD Access **312.335.8882**

Web site **www.alz.org**

e-mail **info@alz.org**

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