

# The building

## THE ENVIRONMENT AND DEMENTIA

This Help Sheet suggests some ways to make the floors, doors, windows and stairs as useful and safe as possible for a person with dementia, their family and carers. Not all suggestions will suit all people or situations, but some people may find a solution to a particular problem they are experiencing with the building.

The aim of any modifications to the building is to aid the mobility of the person with dementia and to help them find their way around. It should also:

- Help prevent falls
- Wherever possible make places safe for wandering

### Checklist

Some common barriers to independence or safety around the building are:

- Deadlocks and lost keys
- Any obstacles to walking inside the house
- Wet, slippery or shiny floors
- Verandahs, balconies and stairs
- Windows and glass doors

### What to try

#### Handrails

The installation of handrails is useful in preventing falls and assisting mobility.

#### Floors

Avoid waxing and polishing floors. Slippery floors can cause falls. Shiny floors can be confusing or disturbing. A number of products are available to make floors slip-resistant.

Remove any loose rugs and mats that can cause falls. Tack down loose floor coverings.

Remove furniture and other obstacles from walking areas if they are likely to cause falls.

Clear electrical cords from floors and secure to the skirting boards.

Regularly check and clean the floor around the toilet for urine to avoid falls caused by slipping.

If the person with dementia is incontinent, carpet may have to be taken up and replaced with washable carpet or non-slip vinyl.

If putting in new floor coverings, select non-patterned, non-slip and non-gloss flooring and use a colour that contrasts with walls and furniture to help the person with orientation.

#### Windows and doors

Mark glass doors and windows with masking tape or safety stickers to help identify the glass barrier.

Draw curtains or blinds at night to avoid reflected glare from windows, which can be disturbing.

Consider changing the doors to the bathroom and toilet to a concertina style so that assistance can be provided if the person has a fall. Alternatively, if the site allows, the door can be rehung by a builder to open outwards.

To assist the person with dementia to identify doorways and exits, paint doors in a contrasting colour to walls.

It may be necessary to differentiate the front door from the back door with different coloured paint or by adding some decoration.

If the person can no longer turn doorknobs, they may be able to manage lever-style door handles.

To discourage a person from going into a particular room which may not be safe for them:

- Camouflage doors by painting doors the same colour as the walls or putting a picture over the door handle.
- A sign on the door, a pot plant or a piece of furniture temporarily placed in front of the door may also work.
- Sometimes, using a half door or swinging saloon-type doors will also be an effective barrier.

A locked security screen door may allow someone to see outside but remain safely inside. However, for some people, it may instead produce frustration as a barrier.

### **Locks**

Remove all locks from the inside of all internal doors to avoid the person getting locked in.

Change locks to avoid deadlocking a person inside.

Give a spare set of keys to a trusted neighbour, police or service provider. Alternatively, install a key holder or safe outside the house and give the code to trusted people.

Simplify locks by getting them recoded so that they all operate from a single master key.

Doorknob covers can prevent the person from opening a door.

Place locks on doors and windows where they cannot be seen or understood. Put them at top or bottom of doors. Add second locks on exit doors, lock them from the inside and remove key or put on a hook near the door but out of sight. Electronic numeric keypads could also be installed which operate by punching in a code. They can be connected to a smoke detector system to ensure that they are overridden in a fire emergency. However, they are expensive and may also not be as secure as a deadlock from the point of view of home security. Wherever possible, choose discreet locks.

Prevent falls out of windows by using bolt locks, or a piece of dowel in sliding windows to limit window opening.

### **Stairs**

If necessary, install a gate at the top of the stairs to prevent falls.

Install solid handrails on both sides of stairs.

Outline the edges of steps with bright coloured paint or tape. Install rubber treads or non-skid adhesive strips on uncarpeted stairs. Install nosings on carpeted stairs. These are non-slip caps which fit over the edge of each step.

If the person can no longer manage the stairs to an upstairs bedroom without assistance, consider converting the lounge room into a downstairs bedroom.

Where possible, replace stairs with ramps inside and outside if mobility is difficult.

Repair any rotting stairs.

### **Verandahs and balconies**

Add a safety railing with vertical slats on verandahs and balconies.

### **Further Information**

Alzheimer's Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**.

For further information and to view other Help Sheets visit our website at **[www.alzheimers.org.au](http://www.alzheimers.org.au)**