

# Utilities

## THE ENVIRONMENT AND DEMENTIA

This Help Sheet suggests some ways to make the heating, cooling, lighting, electricity and gas used in the home as 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 utilities.

The aim of any modifications to the utilities used in the home is to increase the safety of the person with dementia, and should also ensure that a comfortable room temperature is maintained, good even lighting is provided, and any reflected glare is removed.

### Checklist

Regularly check to see if the following present any potential problems:

- Heaters
- Fans
- Air conditioner controls
- Frayed electrical cords
- Power points
- Electrical leads in walkways
- Hot water
- Taps
- Level of lighting
- Shadows
- Reflected glare
- Shiny surfaces
- Flammable clothes such as dressing gowns
- Night lighting

### What to try

#### Heating

Keep the temperature in the house comfortable since some people with dementia can no longer judge temperature or remember how to adjust clothes.

There is a major issue with heating if the person lives alone or requires constant supervision. Avoid kerosene and moveable radiant heaters. If using a fan heater, select one that automatically cuts out if knocked over. If the person can only operate a radiant heater, try to get one that has a safety guard at the front. Use an oil-filled column heater if safety is an issue.

Recent model gas heaters will usually have a safety tilt switch which automatically cuts off the gas if the heater is knocked over. Some also have a "child lock" feature which might prevent some people with dementia from tampering with the controls. Gas heaters made in the last 20 years usually have an ignition device and sometimes a safety tilt feature. Carers could temporarily disable these heaters by turning off the gas at the valve or disconnecting the hose. Alternatively, a solenoid isolator switch could be installed with an electronic keypad to allow the carer to temporarily cut off the gas. Models manufactured prior to the late seventies pose a much greater safety hazard because they usually require lighting the gas with a match.

A gas leak detector could be installed near a gas heater to sense if gas is turned on but not ignited. The detector sounds an alarm if gas is detected. Some detectors can automatically shut off the gas if a leak is detected. It is also possible to install a remote alarm which would sound in another site such as a neighbour's house, or connect the alarm to a phone modem, so that it will ring a particular telephone number. Both possibilities could be

useful if the person with dementia lives alone or is alone during the day.

It may be necessary to block access to an open fireplace, fuel stove or slow combustion heater. If the person is used to lighting fires, you may need to remove all wood, newspapers and matches not only from the house but also from the shed and yard.

Consider installing a combination light heat lamp and extractor fan in the bathroom. If using a wall mounted electric heater, ensure it is mounted in a high position on the wall.

### **Cooling**

It may be useful to locate air conditioning controls in a remote unit if the person is constantly adjusting them.

Overhead fans may cause confusion and distress to some people with dementia. Portable fans may be dangerous.

### **Lighting**

A range of sensor lights and light bulbs with built in timers are now available to assist people who wander at night, but cannot remember how to turn on a light or leave lights on.

### **Hot water**

Reduce the temperature of the hot water to avoid scalds.

A tempering valve can be installed on the hot water system to reduce the temperature of hot water going to the whole house. Alternatively, it can be installed closer to the taps so that you could control the temperature of the hot water going just to the bathroom.

Recent models of gas hot water systems have thermostatic mixing valves operated by a remote electronic keypad in the bathroom and kitchen to set or select the desired temperature. This would allow the carer to set a safe temperature for the person with dementia to use, but at any time raise the temperature for other reasons.

### **Taps**

Label taps "H" or "C" or colour code with red

or green fluorescent paint, waterproof stickers (big red or green spot) or put signs above the taps.

Lever taps have been used successfully by people with dementia who have forgotten or have difficulty with the turning action. However, some people with dementia may not recognise or be able to use a lever tap and it may be necessary to return to conventional tap handles which would be recognisable.

### **Electricity**

Install power point safety covers and check that power points are not overloaded with double adaptors.

Install a safety switch in the fuse box to prevent electric shocks. Safety switches will detect the slightest earth leakage of current in a circuit. An electrician must install them.

Secure electrical cords to skirting boards so they can't be tripped over. Use appliance cord coilers for electrical cords on bench tops.

There are a range of electrical products available which can be used to lock appliances on or off, control appliances from a remote site, or automatically program an appliance to switch on or off at set times.

### **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)**