

Managing Agitation in Dementia: A Guide for Patients & Families

Agitation is a common symptom in people living with dementia. It may include restlessness, irritability, pacing, yelling, or emotional distress. These behaviors are usually a sign that the person is feeling confused, uncomfortable, or overwhelmed. Understanding the possible causes of agitation and learning supportive strategies can help caregivers respond calmly and reduce stress for everyone involved.

Common Signs of Agitation

- Restlessness or pacing
- Irritability or anger
- Yelling or shouting
- Repetitive movements
- Refusing help or becoming argumentative
- Emotional distress or crying

Possible Causes of Agitation

- Pain or physical discomfort
- Hunger, thirst, or fatigue
- Confusion about surroundings
- Changes in routine
- Overstimulation such as loud noise or crowded environments
- Anxiety, fear, or loneliness
- Medication side effects or medical illness

Helpful Ways to Respond

Stay Calm

- Speak slowly and in a reassuring tone
- Avoid arguing or correcting the person
- Keep your body language calm and non-threatening

Identify the Underlying Cause

- Check if the person may be hungry, tired, or in pain
- Look for environmental triggers such as noise or crowding
- Consider whether a recent change in routine may be upsetting

Use Gentle Redirection

- Suggest a different activity
- Change the environment or move to a quieter space
- Offer a familiar object or soothing music

Maintain a Calm Environment

- Reduce noise and clutter
- Maintain consistent daily routines
- Keep lighting comfortable and avoid harsh shadows

Encourage Comfort and Reassurance

- Provide reassurance that the person is safe
- Offer comforting activities such as music, conversation, or a favorite hobby

When to Contact a Healthcare Provider

- If agitation becomes frequent or severe
- If the person becomes aggressive or unsafe
- If behaviors change suddenly
- If agitation may be related to pain, illness, or medication changes

Tips for Caregivers

- Try to understand what the person may be experiencing
- Maintain patience and empathy
- Take breaks and ask for help when needed
- Seek professional support if agitation becomes difficult to manage

National Organizations & Resources

✓ Alzheimer's Association

☎ 800-272-3900 | 🌐 alz.org

✓ National Institute on Aging

🌐 nia.nih.gov

✓ Family Caregiver Alliance

🌐 caregiver.org

✓ Eldercare Locator

☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 eldercare.acl.gov

Final Notes

- Agitation is often a way for people with dementia to express discomfort or confusion.
- Calm responses, supportive environments, and consistent routines can help reduce agitation.
- Caregivers should seek support when behaviors become difficult to manage.