

# Health risks to watch for when someone has dementia

There are some common health risks that increase when a person has dementia.

## **Eating, drinking and nutrition**

- **Dehydration** – forgetting to drink, not recognising thirst, refusing fluids  
*Watch for:* dry mouth, dark urine, tiredness, confusion getting worse
- **Poor nutrition / weight loss** – forgetting meals, struggling to use cutlery, loss of appetite  
*Watch for:* loose clothes, weakness, low mood
- **Choking or swallowing difficulties** (especially later stages)  
*Watch for:* coughing during meals, food pocketing, chest infections

[Drinking, hydration and dementia | Alzheimer's Society](#)

## **Infections and physical health**

- **Urinary tract infections (UTIs)** – very common and can cause sudden confusion  
*Watch for:* sudden agitation, sleepiness, incontinence, strong-smelling urine

- **Chest infections** – linked to reduced mobility and swallowing problems  
*Watch for:* cough, breathlessness, fever, reduced appetite
- **Poor personal hygiene** – person may forget, not recognise the need, or find care distressing. *Watch for:* strong body odour, dirty or unchanged clothes, visible dirt on skin, reluctance to wash or change.
- **Continence-related hygiene difficulties** – problems cleaning after toileting  
*Watch for:* urine or faecal smells, soiled clothing, skin redness or soreness
- **Skin care problems** – washing missed or avoided  
*Watch for:* rashes, itching, broken skin, pressure areas
- **Poor oral health** – forgetting to brush teeth or allow mouth care  
*Watch for:* bad breath, mouth pain, refusing food

[Dementia and personal hygiene - Dementia UK](#)  
[Tips to prevent UTIs in people with dementia | Alzheimer's Society](#)

## **Mobility and safety**

- **Falls** – due to poor balance, judgement, or unsafe walking  
*Watch for:* unsteady gait, rushing, getting up at night, unsuitable footwear

- **Reduced mobility** – sitting for long periods  
*Watch for:* stiffness, pressure sores, increased dependence
- **Wandering or getting lost** – especially if still mobile  
*Watch for:* exit-seeking, restlessness, packing belongings

## **Pain and physical discomfort**

- **Pain going unnoticed** – person may not say they are in pain  
*Watch for:* grimacing, pulling at clothes, aggression, withdrawal
- **Constipation** – common due to diet, inactivity, medication  
*Watch for:* discomfort, agitation, poor appetite

[Understanding dementia and pain - Dementia UK](#)

## **Mental health and wellbeing**

- **Depression** – common in early and middle stages  
*Watch for:* low mood, tearfulness, loss of interest
- **Anxiety** – confusion can feel frightening  
*Watch for:* pacing, reassurance-seeking, clinginess
- **Delirium** – sudden worsening of confusion (often due to infection or illness)  
*Watch for:* sudden change, hallucinations, drowsiness

## Medication risks

- **Missed doses or double dosing** – forgetting what's been taken
- **Side effects** – dementia increases sensitivity to medicines  
*Watch for:* increased confusion, drowsiness, falls

## What helps carers

- Small changes in behaviour often mean **something physical is wrong**
- Sudden changes are **not “just the dementia”** — report them
- Consistent routines, reassurance, and knowing the person well reduce risk
- Always record and share concerns with the wider team or GP