Safety for Persons with Dementia

Protecting your client/resident from harm is a very important part of a Personal Support Worker's (PSW) job. When the person has dementia this becomes even more vital as the person may not be able to recognize or understand dangerous situations.

Focus on prevention, not teaching
Rather than trying to teach or retrain the person with dementia to do things safely, you will be more successful by taking preventative action. Instead of reminding the person with dementia to turn off the stove after cooking, a better idea would be to turn off the fuses on the stove, or turn the stove off at the main circuit breaker, or take the knobs off the stove when the person is not cooking.

Be patient and slow down
Often, accidents occur when the people with dementia are being rushed. Remember that they are doing the best that they can. Hurrying them will not make the process go faster; in fact the opposite is often true. You are also more likely to make mistakes if you are rushing.

Simplify routines
Accidents often occur in the area of personal care, including activities such as bathing, toileting, dressing or eating. You can help lower the risk of accidents by breaking down complicated procedures, guiding people with dementia through a simple step-by-step process, and giving them enough time to complete each task. The person with dementia may not be able to take a shower alone even if they are physically healthy because of the dangers of falling, getting burned by hot water, choking on water, or using things like soap or a razor inappropriately. If you guide the individual through each step of the shower, from taking off each piece of clothing to toweling dry, the person with dementia can continue to shower safely.

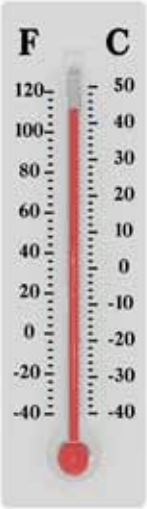
Monitoring Potentially Dangerous Activity
If you are unsure about the safety of a situation, monitor people with dementia as they do a particular task. Do not take away their independence unless it is absolutely necessary for safety reasons. For example, people with dementia may still be able to slice vegetables for dinner if you stay with them to ensure they are safe with the knife.

Creating Safety Plans
Be aware of the safety procedures if you are working in a Long Term Care Home (LTCH) or Alzheimer's Day Program (ADP).

In a private home:
- Have a list of emergency phone numbers
  - Include numbers for hospitals, poison control help lines
  - Include the addresses of the local police and fire departments, and family members
  - Include the client's address on this list (you may be too rattled to remember it if you have to make an emergency call)
- Know where the fire extinguishers are in the home
- Know where all phones are in the home
- Consult your supervisor to determine whether your agency should be a part of the emergency plan
- Plan how you would respond should a fire occur in the home

Additional Home Safety Tips

• Check for smoke alarms & carbon monoxide detectors, and make sure they are in working order
• Ensure there is a fire extinguisher on the premises, and know how to use it
• Clear all walking areas of electrical cords
• Remove unnecessary clutter from floors, stairs and other common areas
• Recommend handrails be installed on both sides of a stairway. Handrails should project beyond the top and bottom steps
• Recommend that the person with dementia wear proper shoes
• Lower temperature of hot water heater to avoid scalding. Make sure it is set at no more than 130°F or 54°C
• Post emergency telephone numbers in large print by all phones for easy access
• If you have a key to a client's home, keep it on your person when you are in the home
• Ensure that the family/client changes the batteries regularly in all of the smoke detectors
• Encourage the family or individual to register with Safely Home (formerly the Alzheimer Wandering Registry)



Kitchen Safety Tips

• Supervise cooking
• Consider removing and hiding stove control knobs
• Consider turning off gas and electricity directed to the stove, remove fuses, put burners on timers
• Use a microwave for heating food rather than a stove
• Use electrical appliances with automatic shut-off
• Keep everyday dishes and kitchen supplies within easy reach. Keep heavy items in lower cupboards and light items no higher than shoulder height
• Make sure refrigerator and cupboards contain fresh food, and discard expired items
• Keep countertops clear and clutter free
• Lock cabinets that contain dangerous substances such as cleaning supplies, sharp knives, scissors and potentially dangerous appliances

Bathroom Safety Tips

• Place nonskid adhesive strips, decals, or mats in the tub and shower
• Use a raised toilet seat with handrails
• Recommend grab bars beside the toilet and in the tub/shower
• Use a shower stool and hand-held showerhead to make bathing easier
• Lower temperature of hot water heater to prevent scalding
• Stick contrasting coloured tape around the tub to help define its edges and depth
• Use coloured bubble bath or a coloured bath mat to make it easier to judge the depth of water. Check for skin irritation if adding certain products to the bath water.

COTA Health will come into the home to do a safety check. They can be contacted by the client or family by phone at 416-785-8797 or 1-888-785-2779 or by email at mailto:info@cotahealth.ca. If you have any questions please contact us at pec@alzheimertoronto.org