



## Make the Most of a Visit with a Loved One Living with Dementia

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that more than 50 percent of nursing home residents have Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia. If you're planning a visit with a loved one in a skilled nursing facility, it can be a challenge. People living with dementia may be living in a completely different time or place than those around them. Additionally, they may not remember what was said just minutes before. Here are some ways you can make the most of your visit.

### Share a meal

Consider eating lunch or dinner with your loved one in the facility's dining room. Food is a good way to reminisce about good memories and provides a topic of conversation ("This meatloaf is really good! What are some of the best meals you've had here?").

### Plan an activity

Bring a jigsaw puzzle or other board game with you so you can engage your loved one in an activity. You can also bring along a book to read or go outside for a walk if the weather is nice.

### Share memories about past events

Because long-term memories may remain intact, reminiscing about the past is a good way to have a conversation that is enjoyable for both of you. Bring a photo album and ask your loved one to share memories with you.

### Bring a gift

Everyone enjoys getting gifts and this may be a natural segue into reminiscing about some of your loved one's favorite presents from the past. Good gifts are those that



stimulate the senses, such as a soft blanket, scented lotions, a CD of favorite music, or a photo of the two of you together. Or you may consider taking some fresh-cut flowers that the two of you can arrange in a vase together.

### Let them live in their own reality

When spending time with your loved one, be prepared to live in their world. If they talk about how well President Eisenhower is doing in his new job, ask them what they like about him. If they don't recognize who you are, but have memories of a son or daughter, invite them to share those memories without explaining who you are.

### Demonstrate empathy

If they get upset about something, validate their feelings by telling them you understand and would

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# “What’s That, Valentine? Speak Up!”

**Jim and Grace are staying home for Valentine’s Day this year. Their tradition was to go to their favorite romantic bistro for the occasion, but lately Jim’s been having trouble understanding conversation when there’s background music and people talking.**

Hearing loss is a very common age-related condition. For almost one-third of older adults, hearing ability decreases to the point that it interferes with our work and our enjoyment of life. It can also affect relationships. An October 2017 study from the University of Nottingham in the UK found that the spouses and partners of seniors with hearing loss also may experience a decline in quality of life.

These partners report that spousal communication suffers when their loved one struggles to hear. The study also found that these “communications partners” experience additional difficulties:

- Their hearing-impaired partner can’t hear the phone ring or hear the person who’s calling, so the spouse must take over telephone duty.
- In order to hear the TV or radio, their partner turns up the volume to a painful degree.
- Increasingly unable to understand conversation in a noisy environment, the spouse with hearing loss may avoid social situations, which often means the other spouse also is at risk of social isolation.
- The spouse of the person with hearing loss is stressed out by the increasingly difficult communication — and often feels guilty about it.

Relationship challenges aren’t the only consequence of hearing loss, of course. According to the National Academy on an Aging Society, hearing loss is the third-most common chronic condition in older adults, behind only arthritis and hypertension, yet it is an often-overlooked health problem. Research shows that hearing loss raises the risk of dementia, depression, diabetes, heart disease and fall injuries. The stress and cognitive load caused by struggling to hear causes many seniors to sink into isolation and inactivity.

And yet, many seniors avoid seeking help when they — or more likely, their spouse or other family members — notice that something’s amiss with their hearing. They’re in denial about the problem. They say, “Well, I’ll wait until the situation is really bad before I bring it up with my doctor.”

This is a bad idea, and here’s why: Hearing consists of a complex cooperation between our ears and our brain. Audiologists say this can be a “use it or lose it” situation. With less input from our ears, our brains can lose the ability to process and understand sounds. Screening allows hearing problems to be diagnosed at an earlier stage so that treatment can preserve more of the brain’s abilities. In most cases, the treatment for hearing loss is to be fitted with hearing aids.

Getting hearing aids is more complicated than, say, being fitted for eyeglasses. A certified audiologist will prescribe a hearing aid that best fits the patient’s situation, but there is still an adjustment period as the patient

learns to put the devices in, take them out and clean them. Seniors with a new hearing aid may feel frustrated at first. But rather than park their new hearing aids in the back of a drawer, they should return to the audiologist for an adjustment. Experts say it can take up to ten visits to get it right — but it’s worth it. Spouses and partners can offer valuable encouragement during this time.

Need more convincing? A second University of Nottingham study examined all the clinical trials on hearing aid use worldwide. Said Dr. Melanie Ferguson, “There is good quality evidence that hearing aids are effective in enabling people to listen better and to participate fully in everyday activities. There is also evidence that there are benefits to their general health from using hearing aids.” Ferguson says this study provides plenty of data to reassure people with mild or moderate hearing loss that using a hearing aid will provide a number of quality-of-life benefits.

The team also had a message for healthcare agencies. Said Ayla Ozmen of the UK charity Action on Hearing Loss, “Hearing aids are hugely beneficial to the lives of



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# Aging & Caregiving in the News

Information, updates and interesting tidbits from across the country and around the world.

## In this issue:

- Senior safety on the bus
- Understanding the results of Alzheimer's tests
- Can yoga lower the risk of falls?

## Senior Safety on the Bus



Vision problems, arthritis, slower reflexes and other changes of aging make many older adults unsafe behind the wheel. Yet transportation is vital for keeping them independent and active in the community, able to access the support services they need. Many seniors take advantage of public transportation, such as the bus or subway. But others hesitate, concerned about safety and the risk of falling while boarding or riding. To help public transit agencies and senior service organizations serve the needs of older passengers, the National Center on Senior Transportation recently partnered with several other organizations to create the Falls Prevention Awareness in Public Transportation ([www.n4a.org/files/N4A\\_Falls\\_wTips.pdf](http://www.n4a.org/files/N4A_Falls_wTips.pdf)). The guide includes tips for senior passengers: take your time, look for priority seating, use handrails, watch out for packages in the aisle, and don't be afraid to ask the driver for help.

## You're At Higher Risk of Alzheimer's — Now What?

Today, sophisticated brain imaging can detect certain changes in the brain that are associated with Alzheimer's disease. One of these is an elevated level of beta amyloid

protein plaques, substances in the brain which researchers can see with a positron emission tomography (PET) scan. University of Pennsylvania professor Dr. Jason Karlawish surveyed a group of seniors who had been told they had this risk factor, and found that doctors need to do a better job of explaining the results. According to the study results, "For many of these seniors, being told that their amyloid levels were 'elevated' on brain scans led to frustration and a desire for more detailed information." Some seniors thought they had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, even though most elderly people have some degree of amyloid plaque, and it doesn't necessarily lead to the symptoms of Alzheimer's. Says Dr. Karlawish, who is co-director of the Penn Memory Center, "In the future, learning this kind of information will be a normal part of going to the doctor, like finding out you have a high cholesterol level. The challenge is to anticipate what it will be like for seniors to learn this and to develop effective strategies to help them cope with problems that may result, such as being stigmatized socially or losing their usual sense of well-being."

## New Study Confirms Yoga Is a Good Balance Exercise

Yoga is often recommended as part of a balance training program. Is it effective? In November 2017, researchers from University of Wisconsin–Madison conducted a study of a group of participants whose average age was 70, to see if improved balance from yoga training could reduce their risk of falls. Twice a week for eight weeks, the participants took a class in hatha yoga, a practice originating in India which features a series of poses that can be performed on the floor or standing. The researchers found that the number of falls among the group of seniors dropped 48 percent over the six months after they'd completed the classes. Reported Anne Bachner, a member of the study's community advisory board, "Yoga makes you have a strong core, so when moving around in your daily life, you are not just flapping around. You are stable, in control."

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### **Visiting A Loved One**, *continued from page 1*

feel the same way if such a thing were happening to you. Then offer to help them solve the issue. If a loved one feels like someone is in their corner and looking out for them, this may allow them to trust you more.

### **Celebrate your relationship**

While seeing someone you've loved all your life slowly slip away from you is understandably upsetting, try to acknowledge that the person who does exist is still a lovable human being in need of compassion. Recognize that whatever its form, you still have a relationship and that it deserves to be nurtured just like any other relationship. Always remember that your loved one is dealing with one of the greatest challenges any of us could face. Your willingness to connect with them helps them have a life that is still joyful and full of purpose.

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### **"What's That Valentine?"**, *continued from page 2*

people with mild to moderate hearing loss. The fact that this affordable, effective intervention has been proven to enable people to continue taking part in everyday situations is extremely important. At a time when many local areas are proposing to cut hearing aids for people with mild to moderate hearing loss, this research further demonstrates what a vital intervention they are."

Here in the U.S. as well, hearing loss has a huge negative impact on the lives of many seniors, and also raises the overall cost of their healthcare. And yet, said a research team from the University of Michigan, "Most people who need hearing aids are surprised that neither Medicare nor most commercial insurance plans cover the cost — which can run anywhere from \$1,500 to \$10,000 per pair. There is often no price negotiation." They are conducting a study that they hope will drive policy changes.

Seniors may have some options to help them cover the cost of hearing aids. To learn more, read "Get Help Paying for Hearing Aids" in the online version of this issue (<http://rphmessenger.com/en/1614/1/2609/Get-Help-Paying-for-Hearing-Aids.htm>).

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