











Dementia Life

Helping when someone resists *personal care*

It's very common for someone living with dementia to resist help with things like bathing, getting dressed, or brushing their teeth. Because of changes in their brain, they might not remember why these tasks are needed—or they may feel confused, embarrassed, or even scared. They might say they already did it, refuse your help, or become upset or angry.

Personal care is just that—very personal. It can feel overwhelming or intrusive. But with a calm approach and a few helpful strategies, you can make things easier for both of you.

Here are some tips to try:

-  **Create a calm and comfortable environment.**
Make sure the room is warm and all the supplies are ready. A cozy space helps things go more smoothly.
-  **Respect the person's preferences.**
Think about what they liked in the past. Did they prefer baths or showers? Morning or evening? What scents or products did they enjoy? Try to follow their old routines as much as possible.
-  **Use clear, gentle language.**
Questions can be confusing. Instead of asking, "Do you want to take a shower?" say, "It's time to get cleaned up," and gently guide them. Offer a reason, like, "Let's get ready for your visit this afternoon."
-  **Protect their privacy and modesty.**
Use towels to keep them covered as much as possible. This helps them feel safe, warm, and less exposed.
-  **Let them do as much as they can.**
Encourage them to wash themselves, using hand motions to show what to do. If needed, try the hand-under-hand method—gently guide their hand with yours so they stay in control.
-  **Avoid pouring water over their head.**
This can be very upsetting. Be gentle and try other ways of rinsing if needed.
-  **Try alternatives if a shower or bath is too stressful.**
A sponge bath while sitting on the toilet might feel easier. You can wash their hair at a sink or salon-style chair. Give them something to hold to help them feel more secure.
-  **If it's not working, take a break.**
If the person is too upset, try again later or let someone else step in. Never force care. Remember: what you're seeing is not defiance—it's the disease. Respond with patience and empathy. Forcing care can increase fear and resistance in the future.



Dementia Life

When they say “No”

Understanding and Responding to Refusals to Bathe or Change Clothes

Refusing to bathe, shower, or change clothes is one of the most common—and often most emotional—challenges in dementia care. What seems like a simple, everyday task to us can feel overwhelming, confusing, or even frightening to someone living with dementia. Instead of focusing just on the “no,” let’s slow down, look a little deeper, and try to understand what that “no” might really be telling us.

Why Someone with Dementia May Refuse Hygiene

What’s Happening	How it Might Look	What They May Be Feeling
Confusion or Forgetting	“I already took a shower today!” (but it’s been several days)	They may truly believe they’re clean
Fear or Sensory Overload	Flinching at water, startled by noise, fearful of stepping into tub	Bathroom feels cold, unsafe, or chaotic
Loss of Insight or Motivation	Wears the same clothes every day, doesn’t notice body odor	They can no longer judge cleanliness or don’t care
Embarrassment or Modesty	Resists undressing, clutches at clothing, turns away	Feels exposed, ashamed, or uncomfortable
Past Trauma	Panic, aggression, or sudden distress during care	Hygiene may trigger old memories of abuse or medical trauma
Feeling Rushed or Out of Control	Shuts down or gets angry when hurried or told what to do	Feels powerless or overwhelmed
Depression or Pain	Withdraws, refuses care, seems disinterested	Lacks motivation or is in physical discomfort

Become a Dementia Detective: A Problem-Solving Worksheet

When faced with resistance, step into the role of a calm and curious problem solver. The behavior is a clue, not a confrontation. This worksheet helps you reflect, adapt, and plan next steps.

1. What might be the reason the person is refusing to bathe?

(Refer to the chart above for ideas.)

2. Am I offering hygiene care at the best time of day? Am I offering a bath or shower at the time of day they are at their best or makes the most sense to them?

Yes / No

If no, what time or situation might work better? _____

3. Is the language I'm using familiar, gentle, and non-threatening?

- Instead of "bath," could I say "freshen up" or "spa time"?
- Could I link it to a pleasant memory or personal routine?
- How did the individual refer to bathing?

What will I try differently next time? _____

4. What can I change in the environment to help them feel safer and more comfortable?

Examples: warmer room, soft lighting, calming music, towel-warmed chair.

5. What can I change in my approach to reduce stress or resistance?

Examples: smile more, offer choices, move slowly, use a calm tone, stay at eye level.

6. What incentives or motivators could I offer?

Examples: favorite treat afterward, praise, connecting the task to a social event or visitor.

7. What tools might help?

- Shower cape
- Handheld shower head
- Bath chair
- Visor to keep water out of eyes
- No-rinse wipes
- Dry shampoo

8. How can I be trauma-aware and protect dignity and modesty?

Examples: use a towel drape, let them wash private areas, have a same-gender caregiver.

9. Is there someone else they may respond better to? _____

10. Did my changes help? If not, what will I try next time? _____

When a Full Bath Isn't Possible: Sponge Baths & Hair Washing in the Sink

Sponge Bath

Sponge baths can be a gentle, effective alternative to a shower—especially for someone who is fearful or fatigued.

What You'll Need:

- Warm water in a basin or sink
- Soft washcloths
- Mild soap or no-rinse cleanser
- Towels for draping and drying
- Gloves (optional for caregivers)

Steps:

1. **Warm the room** and make sure the person is covered with a warm towel or blanket.
2. **Encourage and guide the person to do as much for themselves as possible** - use the hand under hand technique
3. **Wash one area at a time**, keeping the rest of the body covered.
4. **Start with the face and hands**, then arms, chest, back, legs, and private areas last.
5. **Use gentle strokes**, reassuring words, and keep them involved if possible.
6. **Dry each area fully** before moving on to keep them warm and comfortable.

Washing Hair at the Sink

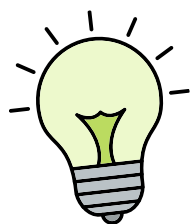
Washing hair at the sink is a great alternative if they resist a full shower.

What You'll Need:

- Handheld sprayer or plastic cup
- No-tears shampoo or dry shampoo
- Towel to protect eyes and neck
- Hair washing basin (optional)
- Comb or brush

Steps:

1. **Seat them comfortably**, with a towel around their shoulders and a towel or basin behind their neck.
2. **Use warm water**, testing the temperature first.
3. **Lean them gently back** or forward depending on what feels more natural to them.
4. **Wet hair, lather, and rinse** using calm, familiar language.
5. **Dry gently** and comb through.



Tip: Sing a favorite song or talk about a memory while you wash. It helps reduce anxiety and makes the experience more positive.

When a Full Bath Isn't Possible: When They Still Refuse – Next Steps

If someone still refuses:

Prioritize Connection Over Perfection

- Step back without forcing – Forcing care can damage trust and increase anxiety; try again later
- A full bath isn't always necessary every day; focus on hand, face, and perineal hygiene
- Change socks and undergarments more frequently
- Ask for help – Some people respond better to someone other than the primary caregiver

Involve the Care Team

- Family, staff, doctor, and therapists should collaborate
- Rule out infections, depression, or pain
- Consider medication review

Final Thoughts

Resistance is not defiance—it's a signal. When we meet these moments with patience, compassion, and creativity - and sometimes humor, we can often transform a stressful situation into a more peaceful one.

Every person is different. What works one day may not work the next—and that's okay. The most important thing is to preserve the person's dignity, autonomy, and emotional well-being. Progress may be slow, but small wins matter!

**We're
here to
support
you.
You're
not
alone.**

