



Dealing with Bathing Challenges

How would you feel if you were hurriedly told to complete a task you can't remember or understand how to do? If you were made to stand naked and vulnerable, in a cold bathroom with lots of slippery surfaces, afraid you may fall and get hurt? Imagine being coaxed into a small space, behind a dark curtain, as loud sounds pound in your ears, and an invisible liquid stings your eyes, fills your mouth, and hits your skin like needles. For someone with dementia, this is how showering can feel - like a terrifying and humiliating experience to avoid at all costs.

Bathing often presents a challenge for individuals with mid- to late-stage dementia who may find the experience frightening or overwhelming. To keep your loved one (LO) healthy with good hygiene and to make the experience pleasant instead of a stressful battle, consider these suggestions:

- Unless they're very physically active, older adults don't need to bathe every day. Washing once or twice a week is generally sufficient to keep skin healthy, so don't create unnecessary challenges by insisting on bathing more often. If body odor is an issue within a day or two of bathing, wet wipes are usually adequate to quickly clean areas where sweat and dirt tend to accumulate.
- Incorporate bathing into your LO's routine by sticking to two or three consistent days and times each week. Choose the time of day when your LO is typically at their "best" and allow plenty of time so you can BOTH avoid the stress of being rushed. (For many folks with dementia, particularly those who experience sundowning, mornings are ideal.)
- Place towels in the same prominent place at the same time every 'bathe day' as a symbolic reminder. This can help gently correct the mistaken belief that "I bathed yesterday."
- Begin by kindly telling your LO it's time to bathe, stating it as a given that it will happen. "It's Monday morning, time to wash." Don't offer a choice to wash or not.
- Speak in soft, gentle tones with VERY simple directions of one or two steps at a time. (Ex. 'Get ready for your shower' leaves out details, and that can make the task overwhelming. Depending upon your LO's abilities, you may need to tell them to take off shoes and place them in the closet, to go to the bathroom, take off shirt, pants, etc.)
- Create a pleasant environment for a familiar, relaxing spa-like experience:
 - Make sure the bathroom is very well-lit, including the shower itself. (Light colored shower curtains are ideal);

- Get the bathroom and dressing area **really** warm, but don't allow the water to get too hot. Folks with dementia can find temperature changes jarring and are often very averse to being cold;
- Lay out everything your LO will need in order of use. (Washcloth, soap, towel, clothes, deodorant). Keep things simple by removing all other products, leaving out only those your LO needs.
- Minimize distractions by turning off the TV, putting pets away, turning off the phone, etc.
- Supply your LO with familiar toiletries they're accustomed to using.
- Provide washcloths and towels in colors that contrast with the room and shower so they're easier to see;
- Make the bathroom a safe space for your loved one:
 - Install convenient handrails or grab bars;
 - Place a non-skid rubber mat in the bottom of the tub;
 - Provide a detachable shower head so the water doesn't hit their face directly;
 - Consider a shower chair;
 - Cover up the mirror if it causes confusion or distraction.
- Allow your LO to feel a sense of control over the situation by giving them simple choices with inconsequential outcomes:
 - "Do you want to use the red or the purple towel?"
 - "Does this water temperature feel nice?"
 - "Would you rather take a shower or bath?"
 - "Is this music too loud?"
- Use positive language to counter objections, such as:
 - Tell your LO a trusted authority (doctor, pastor, friend) has said they need to bathe. A written note or pre-recorded voicemail / video can be useful for repeated use.
 - Tap into the power of flattery!
 - "Mom, you look so beautiful when your hair is clean and styled. Let's wash it so I can help you fix it for XYZ (friend or activity)."
 - "Honey, you look so dashing in ABC (a clean garment), I'd love for you to wear it after you get cleaned up."
 - Offer an incentive / reward for bathing:
 - "After you've bathed, we can watch your favorite program."
 - "I'd love to massage your hands with this lotion (warmed) after your shower."
 - "After we bathe, let's have ice cream!"
 - Associate bathing with a positive feeling.
 - "It was so fun when we did XYZ activity earlier, and now we need to clean up."
 - "We always feel best when we start the day clean after an energizing bath."
 - "Nothing feels better than getting into a freshly made bed after a nice shower!"
- If opting for a bath, understand that visual changes and a loss of depth perception may make your LO unable to see the water. A colorful non-skid tub mat or bright bubbles can be useful to help your LO feel more confident stepping into the tub.
- When it's time to wash and rinse hair, give your LO a folded washcloth to hold their eyes while they tip their head back. (The kitchen sink can also be a great spot for a "mini salon".)

- Honor your LO's dignity by allowing them discretion and privacy. Close the blinds and doors. Allow them to undress under a warm robe or behind the shower curtain. Allow your LO to wear a swimsuit if they want. You can help bathe the uncovered parts of their body, then give them the soapy rag to wash under their swimsuit behind a closed curtain.
- Have some fun with it!
 - Give your LO something to use as a microphone for a shower concert;
 - Offer a rubber ducky for bath time companionship;
 - Playfully sing along to "Splish Splash" to signal bath time;
 - Sneak in a bath by putting your LO in a plastic yard pool with the grandkids!

Finally, on those days you're exhausted and bath time isn't a battle worth choosing, allow yourself some grace, and get out the wet wipes and dry shampoo for a quick "bird bath."

Additional Information

- <https://youtu.be/ffCd7cxFAPk> (awesome role play example!)
- <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/daily-living/washing-bathing-showering-tips#content-start>
- <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/dementia-hygiene#bathing-and-dementia>
- <https://www.alzheimersblog.org/2014/02/14/difficult-behaviors-bathing-personal-hygiene/>
- <https://www.seasonsalf.com/how-to-help-dementia-patients-with-personal-hygiene/>
- <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/dementia-hygiene>
- [Dementia Bathing: A Guide for Caregivers](#)