

Get Ready for Grooming

THE SITUATION

Most people take great pride in maintaining their appearance. However, grooming tasks that were once simple such as combing hair, shaving and brushing teeth can become tremendously complex for individuals with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias. They may look at a comb, razor or toothbrush and not know what to do with it; they may have lost their ability to sequence tasks; or they may be experiencing emotions like fear, resistance and anxiety that can sabotage their personal care efforts. These tips can help ease the process:

THE SOLUTION

- ▶ **Ensure a proper setting.** An environment conducive to the activity at hand can help boost a person's concentration and cooperation. Make sure the area has appropriate lighting, a comfortable temperature and no distractions. Privacy counts.
- ▶ **Adjust grooming tools.** Making the switch to safer, more effective supplies can help prevent injuries and simplify the grooming process. For example, instead of a traditional razor blade, use an electric shaver. Consider purchasing special accessories such as foam grips for toothbrushes and hair washing trays, or different products like dry shampoo.
- ▶ **Develop a routine.** Aim to perform tasks at the same time and in the same order daily. Likewise, doing familiar activities can be comforting to someone with Alzheimer's disease. Continue past habits. If someone is accustomed to going to the barber or manicurist every week, keep it up if possible. Or make an adaptation: ask the barber to make a home visit.
- ▶ **Keep it simple.** Alzheimer's disease decreases the ability to multi-task. So how you communicate instructions is important. It will likely be easier to accomplish the overall task by telling a person what to do one step at a time, using a quiet, calm tone and smiling.
- ▶ **Demonstrate techniques.** Visual cues, in addition to verbal cues, can move the process along, especially when a person's communication skills diminish. Illustrate what to do with a comb by combing your own hair, or with a toothbrush by brushing your own teeth. Then encourage the person to copy your behavior.

- ▶ **Build on a person's strengths.** Encourage the person to handle self-care that is still within abilities and do not be discouraging or lose patience if the task cannot be performed. Teamwork helps in this regard. For example, perhaps you need to apply the toothpaste, but then the person with dementia can still carry out the brushing.
- ▶ **Eliminate surprises.** If it becomes necessary to conduct the task for the person, explain what you are doing; for example, say, "I'm going to cut your nails."
- ▶ **Select favorite items.** Giving an individual with dementia input into personal care adds an element of independence. Let the person select and apply preferred products, such as cologne, make-up or toothpaste.
- ▶ **Be creative.** Since the progressive nature of the disease can cause a technique that worked one day to backfire the next, be creative in your approach. For example, one research study found it effective to use wet wash clothes or to pour water from a pitcher rather than use a spray to rinse a person's hair.
- ▶ **Be patient.** Understand that the activity may take a while so be sure to allow enough time. Rushing the process can stress both you and the person with the disease.
- ▶ **Set realistic standards.** Recognize that perfect self-maintenance may not always be possible—overall or on any particular day. If shaving becomes too difficult, for example, it's okay to grow a beard. If necessary, skip the non-essential tasks in favor of concentrating on crucial grooming like oral hygiene.

Editor's note: For tips on bathing, see the winter 2006 issue of care ADvantage.

— WRITTEN BY SPENCE PACKER

PREPARE IN ADVANCE

Have everything ready for grooming beforehand. The right supplies can limit confusion, simplify grooming and reduce stress.