A Home Risk Assessment Guide for Dementia Carers

By Robin Dynes

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Contents

02 | A Home Risk Assessment Guide for Dementia Carers
03 | Thinking about risks in your current situation
03 | Why a checklist is of little use
04 | Some risk management principles
06 | See risk assessment as a means of enablement
06 | When to do a risk assessment
07 | Doing the risk assessment
09 | Involving professionals
11 | A rough guide to risks in the home
14 | Risk assessment notes
A Home Risk Assessment Guide for Dementia Carers

When we have young children we think about all the dangers in the home...

Frightened they will come to harm we check that their bathwater is not too hot, no harmful substances or medications are left lying around, fit gates on stairs and take 101 other precautions so that accidents do not occur. Children then become aware of dangers and are able to recognise and avoid harming themselves and precautions become unnecessary. Also, throughout life we need to maintain a range of safety precautions, fitting fire alarms and so on. We do this naturally.
Thinking about risks in your current situation

When caring for someone with dementia this process goes into reverse. Because the person has been used to taking general safety precautions they are not always aware of the dangers that they now face. This is also true for you, the carer. It doesn’t come naturally to think about all the extra measures that now need to be taken. After all, the person has managed to negotiate their way safely through life so far, with only a few mishaps.

This does not mean that you start treating the person like a child – far from it. But it does mean, irrespective of whether the person lives with you or independently, it is essential you start thinking about the risks which are likely to arise, discuss these with your loved one and try to avoid accidents. Whilst good sense, this is not always straightforward.

Why a checklist is of little use

Dementia is a progressive condition which means that at different stages it becomes necessary to implement new precautions as it progresses. Also, the environment in which each person lives will evoke different hazards. Add to this that dementia does not affect each person in exactly the same way. Nor do you want to overly restrict the person’s freedom or ability to get on with life normally for as long as possible. This means you need to be constantly aware and keep assessing the situation on a regular basis. It also means a simple checklist is of limited use.
Some risk management principles

Risk management of the environment is influenced by different things:

✔ Your knowledge about the person with dementia, their way of living, wishes and preferences

✔ Knowledge other people have about the person and the condition – friends, other family members and professionals involved.

✔ Your experience and knowledge about dementia and how it is affecting the person, such as loss of memory.

✔ Any decline in physical or mental health. For example, hearing or sight loss, depression, ability to climb stairs, etc.

You should also bear in mind:

✔ Balancing the positive benefits of the person doing something against the risk. For example, the possible dangers of doing an activity against the risk of boredom or unnecessarily restricting the person’s control over their own life. This might include such pleasure as making a cup of tea, using tools or other equipment, if that is important to them.

✔ Coming up with solutions to risks is one of the most important ways of enabling anyone with dementia to retain control over their life.

✔ Focusing on identifying risky obstacles and situations for the particular person, rather than taking a blanket view and seeing everything as a risk. Remember dementia affects people in different ways. What is not safe for one person may be safe for another.

✔ Always choosing to go with solutions which cause least disruption or change and which maximises independence.
✔ Taking into account the person’s own perception of risk when considering the impact of dangers caused by dementia. These will be influenced by decisions and events during their life and may be different from your own. It is important to discuss and, if possible, reach a shared agreement, taking into account everyone involved. After all, it is natural, if they disagree strongly, that they may well resent or ignore precautions you think are necessary.

✔ The person’s strengths, retained skills, abilities and the methods they have used to get over problems in the past. Focusing on these is most likely to lead to success.

✔ Your own fears in relation to any activity or obstacle in the environment. Compare your own perceptions to that of the person at risk, others involved and professionals. Getting opinions from your loved one and others will help you come to a shared, balanced and objective view of any risks, avoiding allowing your own fears to over or underestimate dangers.
See risk assessment as a means of enablement

Use risk assessment as a means of enabling your loved one to continue life as normally as possible. Adopting this attitude will help you take a positive attitude and gain satisfaction from seeing solutions work, rather than viewing risks as an obstacle.

When to do a risk assessment

Times when you should look at or review the risk situation is when:

✔ The person has been diagnosed with dementia.

✔ There are any changes. This might be in their condition, other health problems which affect them, their behaviour, their accommodation - such as moving their bedroom downstairs, etc. - or support! For example, a relative or care worker supporting them for one of two days.

✔ There is any decline in physical or mental health. For example, if balance becomes a problem, handrails on stairs or in the bathroom may be needed. There may be a change in their ability to do some tasks, such as cooking a meal.

✔ There are problems with social skills, loss of hearing or sight.
Doing the risk assessment

All environments, tasks and activities undertaken entail some risk. The aim is to balance risks with the person’s wishes and needs but manage this in a way that enables them to be reasonably safe.

It is helpful to be present in the area that you are risk assessing. You can then think about all the activities and tasks that occur in that area and see what might cause danger. Write them down and note what could happen. Next write down how likely it is and how severe it might be. It may seem overly official and cumbersome to write all this down, but taking the trouble to do it will pay dividends when sharing your fears with others involved, presenting facts, clarifying your thinking and making decisions.

It is a good idea to consult others when doing this as their opinions might differ from your own. You can then look at how the risk can be reduced to make it reasonably safe, taking into account the importance of the activity to the person. If it is, you may be decide to go ahead even though the risk cannot be reduced to a low category.
When doing this, keep in mind the abilities and skills the person has retained. Remember that each person will be different and what provides risk for one person may not for another. It is also why, when there are any changes - either to the environment or in the person’s condition - it is vital to revisit and revise risks.

Here are a few examples. (H = high risk, M = medium, L = low).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk area/ activity</th>
<th>What could happen?</th>
<th>How likely to happen? H/M/L</th>
<th>How severe? H/M/L</th>
<th>How can risk be reduced?</th>
<th>How likely to happen now? H/M/L</th>
<th>How severe now? H/M/L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hallway/ going to toilet</td>
<td>Trip over mats in hall due to poor lighting. Break bones.</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Remove mats and improve lighting.</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bathroom/ bathing</td>
<td>Fall climbing in and out of the bath and break bones.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Fitting handrail in bath</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchen/ making tea</td>
<td>Drop kettle and scald himself.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Leave a small flask of tea so he doesn’t need to boil kettle.</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Involving professionals

It is tempting to think that you know your loved one and their home best. You do, but you have been living or supporting them in an environment which you considered safe up until now. Because of familiarity and the situation being new there will be many things which do not occur to you. Also, professionals will have had experience, be used to looking for hazards and will also have ready available solutions to make the environment safer and enable the person continue doing their day-to-day tasks, hobbies and activities. They will also be able to give advice about sources of financial help to fund any necessary aids or building adaptions.
Professionals you can consult include:

✔ Private services such as Carewatch UK. These often provide a care assessment which looks for potential dangers and give advice, which includes applying for funding to finance identified needs.

✔ An occupational therapist. Can give advice on equipment, adaptations in the home, such as hand rails, bath seats, raised toilets seats, adapted cutlery and kitchen tools, etc. as well as assistive technology. To arrange a visit speak to your GP or local Social Services department. For a private occupational therapy assessment contact The British Association of Occupational Therapists. (www.cotss-ip.org.uk)

✔ A physiotherapist. Can give advice on mobility devices such as walking aids, wheelchairs and safe ways to help individuals move round. You can ask your GP for a referral to your local hospital physiotherapy department.

✔ A continence advisor. Can give advice on a range of aids to help with incontinence. Ask your GP if one is available in your area.

✔ A district nurse. Will give advice on what equipment is available for nursing someone at home safely. Can be contacted through your GP.

When making a home safe for someone with dementia there are many aids and adaptations. A professional assessment, taking into account your knowledge of the person, how they are affected by the condition, their attitude to risk and the environment, with the suggested solutions can save both worry and accidents.
A rough guide to risks in the home

The dangers listed below are only some of the general things you should look out for. Some solutions which might be helpful in reducing risk are also shown. Remember that all environments and individuals are different and other solutions might be required. Stand in each room, including the garage, garden and shed and make notes, keeping the persons’ abilities in mind and any activities or tasks they might do in that room or area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possible sources of risk</th>
<th>Solutions to consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steps – stumbling and falling</td>
<td>Fitted handrail and/or marking the edges with brightly coloured tape to make them more visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stairways</td>
<td>Fit a strong handrail or put a gate top and bottom, if a handrail is insufficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mats – tripping and falling</td>
<td>Remove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low lighting – walking into items and falling</td>
<td>Brighter lighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstacles such as plant pots or low tables, lamp stands – danger of walking into, losing balance and falling</td>
<td>Remove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loose or torn carpets</td>
<td>Mend or replace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to the toilet in the night</td>
<td>Leaving the landing and/or bathroom light on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clutter, such as boxes, piles of magazines or newspapers</td>
<td>Remove or keep tidied away in a cupboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazardous items such as scissors, sharp tools, saws, knives, paint thinners, paint, cleaning fluids, petrol cans, weed killer, and bleach</td>
<td>Remove or lock away if necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power tools such as drills and hedge cutters. Also, lathes or other workshop tools.</td>
<td>Remove, lock away or make safe so they can’t be used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medications, both prescribed and bought, such as aspirin and cough mixture</td>
<td>Remove or lock away</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above gives you a general indication of what might present a danger to your loved one in the home environment. It is better to take precautions and avoid something happening rather than realising afterwards that an accident could have been avoided. Below is a blank form which you can use to make your notes. Print as many copies as you need.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Precaution/Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alcohol</strong></td>
<td>Remove or lock away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lotions, shampoos, Perfumes</strong> (These can look appetising to some)</td>
<td>Remove or lock away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hot water when bathing or washing up</strong></td>
<td>Turn down temperature in system to prevent burning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Taps – some modern taps make it difficult to distinguish between hot and cold</strong></td>
<td>Label hot and cold taps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kitchens and gas fires</strong></td>
<td>Have carbon monoxide and smoke alarms in kitchens and any rooms with gas fires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Electricity outlets</strong></td>
<td>Use childproof plugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cookers</strong></td>
<td>Switch off at the main control when not using and get an appropriate fire extinguisher and fire blanket. Obtain removable knobs for the cooker so they can’t be turned on, or have cut-out mechanisms fitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kitchen electrical appliances</strong></td>
<td>Remove any not needed and/or stick labels or pictures on to show what they do. Use kettles and appliances that switch off automatically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Matches</strong></td>
<td>Dispose of matches and use battery operated lighters to light gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bicycles</strong></td>
<td>Lock so they cannot be used. (Essential if the person has been using a bicycle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cars and other vehicles</strong></td>
<td>Make sure the keys are not available (Essential if the person has been used to driving and is no longer safe doing so)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leaving the house without you knowing</strong></td>
<td>Install an alarm or chime system on outside doors or use an electronic tracking device so you know where they are at all times. (Useful if they tend to go out and there is danger of them getting lost)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk area/activity</td>
<td>What could happen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Organisations and sources of useful information

The following organisations provide a range of information, advice and support

**Alzheimer’s Society.**
Provides information and advice both for people with dementia and their carers.
- info@alzheimers.org.uk
- www.alzheimers.org.uk
- 020 7423 3500
Helpline: 0845 300 0336

**AT Dementia**
Provides information on Assistive Technology that can help people with dementia live more independently.
- info@trentdsdc.org.uk
- www.atdementia.org.uk
- 01162575017

**Carers UK**
Provides information and advice to carers about their rights and how to access support.
- info@ukcarers.org
- www.carersuk.org
- 0808 808 7777

**Carers Direct** (Part of NHS Choices)
Provides free confidential information and carers. Calls are free from UK landlines.
- carersDirect@nhschoices.nhs.uk
- www.nhs.uk/CarersDirect
- 0808 802 0202

**Dementia UK**
Provides training for those who work with people with dementia as well as employing Admiral Nurses who specialise in dementia care and provide both practical and emotional support.
- info@dementiauk.org
- www.fordementia.org.uk
- 020 7697 4160
Helpline: 0845 257 9406
or e-mail direct@dementiauk.org

**Alzheimer Scotland**
22 Drumsheugh gardens
Edinburgh EH3 7RN
- 0131 243 1453
- info@alzscot.org

**Princess Royal Trust for Carers**
This one of the largest providers of carer support services. They provide information, advice and support.
- info@carers.org
- www.carers.org
- 0844 800 4361

**Royal College of Psychiatrists**
This website contains some excellent information on Alzheimer’s and treatments
- rcpsych@rcpsych.ac.uk
- www.rcpsych.ac.uk
- 020 72352351

**Solicitors for the Elderly**
This is an independent, national organisation of lawyers such as solicitors, barristers, and legal executives who provide specialist legal advice for older and vulnerable people, their families and carers.
To locate a solicitor near you:
- admin@solicitorsfortheelderly.com
- www.solicitorsfortheelderly.com
- 0844 567 6173

**Benefits Enquiry Line**
Provides advice and information on the benefits you can claim if you are disabled or a carer.
- www.gov.uk/benefit-enquiry-line
- 0800 882 200

**UK Homecare Association Ltd**
This is the national association for organisations who provide social care to people in their homes.
- enquiries@ukhca.co.uk
- www.ukhca.co.uk
- 020 8661 8188

**Memory & Alzheimer’s Cafés UK Directory**
- www.memorycafes.org.uk

**Dementia Friends**
- www.dementiafriends.org.uk