

Tips for Activities of Daily Living

A Caregiver's Guide for Supporting Everyday Abilities

Alzheimer's disease affects far more than memory. It gradually diminishes a person's ability to complete the most basic parts of their day. These are what healthcare professionals call **Activities of Daily Living**, or ADLs. These include bathing, dressing, and toileting: the most private, personal rituals of self-care.

When a person living with Alzheimer's begins to struggle with ADLs, it is important to remember: it is not that they *won't*, it is that they *can't*. Alzheimer's is a brain injury. Multiple cognitive deficits work together to make even simple tasks feel impossible.

This guide is designed to help caregivers understand those deficits and respond with confidence, compassion, and practical strategies.

Four A's of Alzheimer's

Amnesia – Memory Loss

Amnesia first affects recent memory, making it hard to store new information. A person may forget a conversation moments after it ends or not recall being reminded to brush their teeth, even while older memories remain more intact.

Agnosia – Inability to Recognize Familiar People and Things

Agnosia makes it difficult to recognize familiar people, objects, or places. Someone may not identify common items or may misinterpret what they see, even though their vision and hearing remain intact.

Aphasia – Communication Difficulties

Aphasia affects both speaking and understanding language. A person may speak unclearly or follow only fragments of a conversation. They often rely more on body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions than on the words themselves.

Apraxia – Loss of Automatic Body Movements

Apraxia disrupts the automatic actions we usually perform without thinking. Tasks like unbuttoning a shirt, brushing hair, or turning on a faucet become difficult because the brain can no longer coordinate the steps.

Other Cognitive Changes That Affect ADLs:

- Inattention to time and shortened attention span
- Trouble planning or completing multi-step tasks
- Increased activity that is purposeless, repetitive, and compulsive
- Difficulty controlling temper or frustration
- Need for immediate gratification
- Increased refusal to participate

These challenges explain why bathing, dressing, and toileting can become the hardest parts of the day. The ABCs of ADLs can help.

ABCs of ADLs

A

Acute Awareness

- Understand the person's limits before reacting to resistance. Remember: it's *can't*, not *won't*.
- Assess the environment: Is it too hot or cold? Too dimly lit? Is there distracting background noise from a TV?
- Consider how the person is feeling. What would help them feel safer and more secure?
- Reflect on your own approach and attitude, as it directly affects the person's mood and cooperation.

B

Break it Down

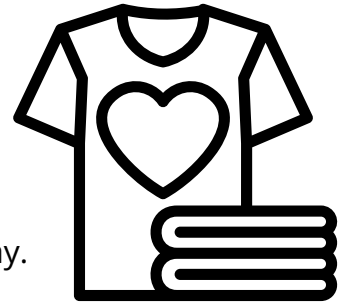
- Give instructions one step at a time. Instead of "take your clothes off," say "unbutton your shirt," and demonstrate.
- Allow time for the person to process and respond before moving to the next step.
- Praise every step. Encouragement builds confidence and cooperation.
- Breaking tasks into small steps takes longer, but it preserves the person's dignity and autonomy.

C

Calm Communication

- A person's mood often mirrors the caregivers. If you are tense, they will be tense.
- Use a gentle touch and a soft, calm voice.
- Do not be drawn into arguments. When a person says, "I already had my bath," respond matter-of-factly, without confrontation.
- Humor — laughing with (never at) the person — is a powerful tool for easing tension and helping bodies relax.

Tips for Dressing:



Dressing involves many small steps that can be challenging for someone with Alzheimer's. These tips create a calmer start to the day.

- **Remove dirty clothes.** Take used clothing out of the room right away. If left nearby, it may be found and put back on.
- **Simplify choices.** Offer two outfits to choose from or choose for the person entirely if needed. Too many options create confusion and frustration.
- **Lay clothes out in order.** Arrange items in the sequence they should be put on, reducing the number of decisions required.
- **Buy multiples of favorites.** If they prefer the same outfit daily, having identical sets keeps laundry easy and avoids conflict.
- **Clean out the closet.** Remove items that don't fit, are out of season, or that you don't want them to wear. What they can't find, they can't put on.
- **Choose easy-care, easy-wear clothing.** Look for simple, comfortable pieces with elastic waists, Velcro, snaps, and easy-care fabrics.

Tips for Toileting:

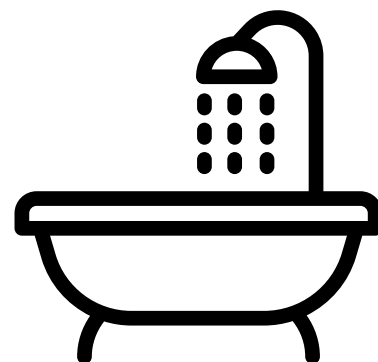


Toileting requires sensitivity, routine, and patience. These strategies help prevent accidents and protect dignity.

- **Establish a routine.** Take the person to the bathroom every two hours. Don't wait for them to ask, and don't rely on yes/no questions. Guide them gently instead.
- **Support digestive regularity.** Provide fiber, fluids, and watch for constipation, a common source of agitation. A warm drink can help stimulate a bowel movement.
- **Watch for behavioral cues.** Restlessness, wandering, tugging at clothing may signal the need to use the bathroom.
- **Never shame or ridicule.** Accidents happen. Stay calm and matter-of-fact.
- **Manage nighttime wetting.** Restrict fluids in the evening hours. Use a bedside commode, protective bedding, and incontinence briefs or pads. Use neutral terms like "briefs" or "pads" - never "diapers."
- **Address pad removal.** If they pull at pads, try soft mittens or offer safe items to hold and tear.

Tips for Bathing:

Bathing can be one of the most challenging ADLs. These strategies can make it safer, calmer, and more dignified for everyone.



- **Respect lifelong habits.** Don't introduce a shower to someone who has always taken tub baths. Familiarity provides comfort and reduces resistance.
- **Choose the right time of day.** Does a warm bath help them relax before bed? Or do they experience late-day agitation (sundowning)? Timing matters.
- **Prepare the environment.** Install grab bars and a hand-held showerhead. Use nonslip mats and a shower bench. Check that the room and water temperatures are comfortable.
- **Use a large towel.** Wrapping the person in a big towel helps them feel more secure and less exposed.
- **Cover mirrors.** Seeing their own reflection, or yours, can cause confusion and distress. Covering the mirror can reduce anxiety and increase the sense of privacy.
- **Start at the feet, not the face.** Washing the face first can feel like a "frontal assault." Begin at the feet and work upward. By the time you reach the face, they'll likely be relaxed enough to cooperate.
- **Use a small amount of water for tub baths.** Deep water can be frightening. Consider coloring the water with a bath tablet so the person can see it clearly and feel less fearful.
- **Keep humor close.** Laughing together, never at the person, eases tension naturally. When you relax, they relax.

This guide is intended for caregiver education and nonprofit distribution. Always consult a healthcare professional for individualized medical guidance.



For more information on caregiving, contact us:

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