

# Housing Options for People Living With **Dementia**

## Helpful Home Changes for People Living with Dementia

*Assisting people with dementia to remain as safe and independent as possible in their home or community poses unique challenges to their housing, health and support needs. Thankfully, there are a number of relatively simple changes that can be made to almost any home to make them safer, more comfortable and more familiar for anyone who is living with dementia—and to assist their families, friends and caregivers in meeting their daily needs.*

CMHC's *Housing Options for People Living with Dementia* offers simple and practical advice on home adaptations, renovations and design suggestions to help people living with dementia, and their caregivers or housing providers, create a living environment that:

- increases safety, security and a sense of belonging;
- maximizes abilities and focuses on strengths; and
- encourages independence and involvement in life.

### Lighting

- Extend curtain rails beyond the windows, to let in as much natural light as possible.
- Remove any indoor furniture or objects, or outdoor landscaping, that might block the windows and keep light out.
- Avoid hanging or lace curtains, as these can cause shadows or misperceptions.

- Use a variety of different types of lighting, including overhead lights, natural light and task lighting.
- Use coloured light switch plates to contrast light switches with the wall around them, so they'll be easier to find and identify.
- Replace any burnt-out light bulbs as soon as possible.

### Doors

- Paint doors in a different colour than the surrounding walls, so they'll be easier for someone living with dementia to find and use.
- Doors should also open fully, so that the interior of the room is clearly visible from the hallway.
- Avoid sliding doors, as people living with dementia can find them hard to use.
- If possible, rehang bathroom doors to open outward, to allow for easier access in case someone falls against the door from the inside.



- Plus, use signs placed at eye height to identify the doors to key rooms, such as the bathroom or kitchen. Signs like 'STOP' written in big, bold letters can also be used for doors that are not meant to be accessed.

## Signs

When using signs to help someone with dementia find his/her way around a home, make sure the signs are:

- consistent in style, and coloured to contrast with the door or wall;
- mounted no higher than 1.2 metres (3 feet, 11 inches) from the floor;
- written with capital and lower case letters, and perhaps a graphic, photograph or directional signage if a location isn't obvious; and
- made using a visible contrast between the words and the background (such as light lettering on a dark background).

## Floors

- Use consistent colour, tone or patterns as inconsistencies can be misinterpreted as steps, and increase the risk of falling.
- Avoid shiny floors, as they can cause glare or be confusing or slippery.

- Install low-pile carpeting to help cushion floors in case of falls.
- Remove threshold strips and doormats, as they can cause people to stop or falter.
- Avoid linoleum, carpet or vinyl flooring that has large specks or sparkles, as people with dementia may attempt to pick up the specks.
- If there are different flooring types adjacent to each other, make sure they have light-reflecting values that are as similar as possible.

## Stairs

- Install solid, reinforced handrails on both sides of all stairways.
- Outline the edges of all steps with brightly coloured paint or tape.
- Install rubber treads or non-skid adhesive strips on uncarpeted stairs.
- Avoid strong tonal changes in the flooring at or near the top and bottom of the stairs, as a change in tone could be perceived as a hole, and lead to fear or confusion.

## Handrails

- Easily 'graspable,' with rounded ends, a non-slip surface and a diameter of around 38 mm (1.5 in.).
- Handrails should also be secured firmly to the wall, to allow for a firm grip and to support the weight of anyone using them.
- Install a knob, inward turn or other feature at each end of the rail, to indicate where the handrail stops.



## Kitchens

- Choose traditional- or familiar-looking equipment and appliances.
- Make sure the utensils and equipment the person uses most often are visible and easily reachable.
- Install heat and smoke sensors that can automatically shut off the stove, oven or other hazardous appliances.
- Maximize the amount of light by installing strip lighting above kitchen surfaces and adding spotlights for work areas.
- Avoid speckled surfaces that could be mistaken for crumbs or bugs.
- Minimize noise levels by using sound-absorbent surfaces where appropriate.
- Try to make sure the stove and countertops are at an even level, as it may be difficult for someone with dementia to judge differences in height.

## Bathrooms

- Choose fittings that look as traditional, and are as easy to operate, as possible.
- Use contrasting colours to visibly separate the toilet seat from the bowl and the floor.
- Install non-slip flooring and avoid threshold strips or make sure they blend in with the adjacent hall or bedroom flooring.
- Add handrails in a colour that contrasts with the walls and floor.
- Maximize natural light and position overhead lights where they will minimize shadows and won't shine in anyone's eyes.
- Install a handheld showerhead, so the person with dementia can see where the water is coming from and have some control over it.
- Purchase a free-standing shower seat if needed, and make sure the entry to the shower is barrier-free.

## Bedrooms

- Make sure the bedroom is as quiet and familiar as possible.
- Maximize natural and artificial light levels.
- Choose wardrobes with open or glazed doors.
- Use signs to identify contents of drawers.

## Dining room

- Use the same or similar flooring throughout the room.
- Choose traditional furniture that contrasts visually with the floor and use signs to label pieces of furniture, like the sideboard or buffet, to indicate what they're used for.
- Make sure there's plenty of natural and artificial light, to promote a positive mood and encourage eating.
- If new tableware is required, make sure it contrasts with the table and don't choose designs with distracting or childish patterns.
- Consider buying plates, bowls and cutlery that have been modified to assist those with physical disabilities, like large-handled cutlery for people who have difficulty grasping.



## Living room

- Choose traditional furniture and fittings that contrast with the floor and give strong cues to the purpose of the room.
- Maximize natural and artificial light levels and make sure there are no curtains, trees or shrubs blocking the windows.
- Give the room a focus point other than a TV, like a traditional-looking fireplace with a mantelpiece.
- Consider changing or adding cushions to make the furniture more visible.
- Use a cover or cupboard to cover the television when it's switched off, as TVs can alarm people with dementia by showing a reflection of their faces.

## Outdoor spaces

- Make sure the access to the outdoors is level and barrier-free and provide ramps where they're needed.
- Place a comfortable chair or sitting area outdoors, in a spot that's clearly visible from the door or windows.
- Take advantage of terraces, patios or balconies as "halfway outdoor" areas that still feel safe and protective.
- Come up with things to do in the yard or garden as a way of encouraging people to go outside.

For more information, download *Housing Options for People Living with Dementia, volumes 1, 2 and 3* or for other resources that are available to assist both housing providers and caregivers in designing, renovating or adapting a home to meet the needs of people living with dementia, visit the CMHC website at [cmhc.ca/aginginplace](http://cmhc.ca/aginginplace).

