



Occupational Therapy Australia and Dementia Australia

A Joint Position Statement

November 2024



What is dementia?

Dementia is a term for many conditions that progressively impair brain function. Dementia can involve changes in cognition, language, memory, perception, personality, behaviour, mobility and physical abilities.^{1,2}

Dementia is more common in older people but can be diagnosed in children, young adults and people in middle age.

There are different symptoms for different types of dementia and these changes can often fluctuate making each experience of dementia unique to that individual. Changes caused by dementia can result in impairments to everyday functioning. Progressive changes mean that impairments in functioning can range from more complex areas such as money management or driving through to everyday tasks such as personal care, showering and dressing.

Dementia is the second leading cause of death of all Australians and is the leading cause of death for Australian women. It is predicted that by 2058, the rates of dementia will more than double and 812,500 Australians will be living with dementia. In 2024, more than 1.6 million people in Australia are involved in the care of someone living with dementia.³ The increase in dementia rates will place significant pressure on Australia's informal carers and across formal care structures in the health, disability and aged care systems.⁴

¹ Dementia Australia, Dementia Statistics: Key facts and statistics, <https://www.dementia.org.au/statistics>, January 2022

² Dementia Australia, Assessment and diagnosis of dementia: diagnostic criteria, assessment and screening tools, and guidance on disclosing dementia, <https://www.dementia.org.au/about-dementia/dementia-facts-and-figures>

³ Dementia Australia, About Dementia: Dementia Facts and Figures, <https://www.dementia.org.au/about-dementia/dementia-facts-and-figures>, August 2023

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Dementia in Australia, 28 March 2024 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/dementia/dementia-in-aus/contents/summary#Common>

What is an occupational therapist?

“**Reablement – that’s what it’s all about. Engaging with an OT supports me to maintain my independence, agency and continue to do the things I enjoy doing.**”
Person living with dementia.

Occupational therapists are allied health professionals who support people with a range of health and well-being needs, including dementia. Occupational therapists partner with people living with all stages of dementia to support engagement in everyday activities and address the impacts dementia symptoms may have on daily life. Early intervention can help delay the progression of dementia so getting support as soon as symptoms manifest or a diagnosis is confirmed, is key to maintaining a person’s functional abilities and independence.⁵

Occupational therapists use the term ‘occupation’ to describe all the everyday activities a person undertakes. The ability to engage in meaningful occupations of life is central to positive health and wellbeing. These activities might include the routine daily tasks we do to take care of oneself (and others), work or volunteering roles, and social or other activities that allow us to participate in hobbies or leisure pursuits.

Evidence shows that working with an occupational therapist can help to maintain independence, reduce the impact of changes in behaviour and improve quality of life for people living with dementia.⁶

⁵ Frederiksen, K. S., Arus, X. M., Zetterberg, H., Gauthier, S., Boada, M., Pytel, V., ... Mattke, S. (2024). Focusing on earlier diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease. *Future Neurology*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.2217/fnl-2023-0024>

⁶ Bennett S, Laver K, Voigt-Radloff S, et al Occupational therapy for people with dementia and their family carers provided at home: a systematic review and meta-analysis *BMJ Open* 2019;9:e026308. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2018-026308

How can occupational therapy help?

Occupational therapists design strategies that focus on a person's goals, abilities and motivations. With an emphasis on cognitive reablement and restorative approaches, occupational therapists' will take into consideration a person's current needs and abilities, as well as anticipated changes to their function and future support requirements. Occupational therapists adopt a person-centred approach to care and in doing so, consider the balance between safety measures and enabling engagement in meaningful occupations.

“ I recommend an OT to everybody - they're the most important people to have on your team. ”

Person living with younger onset dementia.

Daily activities of living

Many people living with dementia experience difficulties undertaking their daily activities such as personal care, meal preparation or housework. In these circumstances, occupational therapists recommend a variety of strategies to ensure ongoing safe participation including:

- activity retraining to highlight a person's abilities and mitigate any risks
- carers training to support someone living with dementia to safely undertake certain tasks
- prescription of aids/equipment and environmental changes to enhance participation such as rails to main entrances or internal steps, changes to layout to make walker or wheelchair use easier, or digital devices to support with memory or organisation.

“ I love cooking. The changes we have made in the kitchen (a convection stove top and reorganisation of cupboards) reduces the load on the brain in terms of having to make decisions about where things are. I can access things quickly so I don't get tired or frustrated. ”

Person living with dementia.

Environment

Occupational therapists are skilled in understanding how environmental factors can enable a person living with dementia to be comfortable and engaged in home life. Environmental strategies to address independence, quality of life or safety can vary from small changes like increased lighting along passageways through to more complex changes like the installation of walk in showers in bathrooms or changes to make entrances and access ways wheelchair accessible.

“ Environmental issues are very important. We started with the bathroom and kitchen – we looked at the lighting, put in colour contrasts (the toilet seat, the toilet buttons and the vanity unit) and rails. I have a sensor light that triggers when I approach the toilet. It makes it all so much more manageable. ”

Person living with dementia

Functional mobility

People living with dementia may experience physical decline and loss of functional mobility. Functional mobility relates to someone’s ability to perform routine movements such as getting on and off a chair or in and out of bed, or navigation of steps or stairs. Occupational therapists apply evidence-based strategies to address changes to functional mobility with the aim of improving mobility and engagement in everyday life and reducing the risk of falls and injury.⁷

“ They can provide so many useful things: tap turners, vehicle modifications, swivel seats, tablet timers, raised toilet seats, wheelchair ramps. ”

Person living with younger onset dementia

Recreation

Recreational and leisure activities are an important part of many people’s lives and the ability to do these things impacts on quality of life and wellbeing. Occupational therapists identify the barriers to enjoying activities of interest, like gardening or attending social clubs, and apply strategies to support participation in these activities. These strategies

⁷ Clemson L, Stark S, Phillips AC, Fairhall NJ, Lamb SE, Ali J, Sherrington C. Environmental interventions for preventing falls in older people living in the community. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2023, Issue 1. Art. No.: CD013258. DOI: [10.1002/14651858.CD013258.pub2](https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD013258.pub2)

may consider carer support needs and the physical, social, and/or cognitive barriers to involvement. Occupational therapists might also explore new recreation or leisure opportunities.

“ OTs have an overarching ability to provide holistic support in so many areas, not just in daily activities but in community access. ”
Person living with younger onset dementia

Driving

Driving is a highly complex skill that relies on many different body systems working well in an integrated way. People living with dementia may experience changes to their cognition, physical function or vision that can impact their ability to drive or to be transported as a passenger. Specialist driver-trained occupational therapists are skilled in assessing whether people with dementia meet the standards required for driving in Australia. They can identify strategies to continue driving or explore driving alternatives if it is no longer safe to drive.

“ My driving became an issue and my GP suggested an assessment. We arranged to have an OT present when I had the test. I did a simulated test with her for an hour before the actual driving test and she gave me feedback after the test and suggested some strategies. I was able to drive for longer with her input; the result would have been very different without the OT. ”
Person living with dementia.

Carers

Caring for and supporting someone with dementia can be both physically and emotionally challenging. Occupational therapists provide specific interventions that improve the quality of life, wellbeing and safety of carers as well as people living with dementia.⁸ This includes addressing specific areas of difficulty in providing care (such as showering), structured communication skills that match the person’s cognitive abilities, and stress management techniques or mindfulness training.

⁸ Clemson L, Laver K, Rahja M, Culps J, Scanlan JN, Day S, Comans T, Jeon YH, Low LF, Crotty M, Kurrle S, Cations M, Piersol CV, Gitlin LN. Implementing a Reablement Intervention, “Care of People With Dementia in Their Environments (COPE)”: A Hybrid Implementation-Effectiveness Study. *Gerontologist*. 2021 Aug 13;61(6):965-976. doi: 10.1093/gerund/gnaa105. PMID: 32803248.

Occupational therapists can also ensure the environment is set up to facilitate safe delivery of care and provide training for the safe use of equipment or manual handling techniques.

“ OTs are not just about providing equipment. They enable us to live well by providing support for the person and their carers. ”

Person living with younger onset dementia

Cognitive changes

Changes to cognition are a common feature of dementia. These changes may fluctuate and affect areas of functioning like memory, concentration, thinking, decision-making and reasoning. These changes can progress to a point where communication, orientation and visual perception (i.e. judging distances) are impacted. Occupational therapists can develop tailored strategies to address these changes using a variety of strategies such as activity retraining and reablement or prescription of aids and technologies.

“ We have ramps for wheelchairs but OTs can help us by providing ‘cognitive ramps’. ”

Person living with dementia

Changes in behaviour

Over the course of the condition, many people living with dementia experience some sort of change to their behaviour or psychological or mood symptoms, such as anxiety.⁹ Occupational therapists are skilled in understanding factors contributing to behavioural and psychological changes associated with dementia and can work with the person living with dementia and their family members and carers to tailor strategies to address these changes.¹⁰ Triggers such as noisy environments or unfamiliar places can be addressed through occupational therapy interventions to reduce the impact these changes may have on a person’s care and wellbeing.

⁹ Cerejeira J, Lagarto L, Mukaetova-Ladinska EB. (2012) Behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia. *Front Neurol.* 2012 May 7;3:73. doi: 10.3389/fneur.2012.00073. PMID: 22586419; PMCID: PMC3345875.

¹⁰ Bennett, S., Travers, C., Liddle, J., O’Connor, C., Low, L.F., Laver, K., Clemson, L., O’Reilly, M., Beattie, E., Smith, S., & Gitlin, L. (2023). Barriers and enablers to the delivery and implementation of the tailored activity programme in Australia: Perspectives of occupational therapists and their managers. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 70(2), 218–232. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12850>

Understanding the life history and experience of a person living with dementia allows an occupational therapist to tailor strategies and training to meet the needs of the person living with dementia, and their carers and family members.

Younger onset dementia

Younger onset dementia is defined as a diagnosis before 65 years of age. People living with younger onset dementia can experience different challenges compared with older people and these can include changes that impact on paid work roles, family commitments and other responsibilities. These difficulties can place pressure on their ability to hold and maintain employment and can increase the risk of financial distress. Occupational therapists can support people living with younger onset dementia with their paid vocational roles by considering their work environments and task performance, and in the personal domain, including parenting roles, family relationships and other unpaid vocational roles.

How do you access an occupational therapist?

Occupational therapists work in a range of health and aged care settings, including public hospitals, community health and rehabilitation services, residential aged care homes and in private practice clinics.

Find an OT is a service offered by Occupational Therapy Australia to help people locate an occupational therapist with specific skills or clinical expertise in dementia.

People can pay for occupational therapy services privately, or they can utilise funding programs to support their access; the latter will depend upon eligibility criteria and may require a co-contribution. A referral isn't usually required when paying privately to access occupational therapy services.

Potential funding avenues include:

Private health insurance: some private health insurance funds provide rebates for occupational therapy services or for access to health and wellbeing programs that include occupational therapy. A self-referral is usually required for these services.

My Aged Care: provides a referral point for older people to register and be assessed for Commonwealth aged care funding. This funding can be used to access occupational therapy. People can self-refer, or a health professional can complete a referral.

National Disability Insurance Scheme: people living with younger onset dementia may be eligible for funding through the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Referral to the scheme would typically involve the support of health professionals.

Chronic Disease Management Plan: provides up to 5 Medicare-subsidised allied health services each year. A referral from a GP is required.

Mental Health Treatment Plans: provides up to 10 individual and 10 group Medicare-subsidised sessions each year. A referral from a GP is required. These plans only fund services from mental health accredited clinicians such as a mental health occupational therapist.

Department of Veteran's Affairs: many Department of Veterans Affairs card holders (especially Gold card holders) are eligible for occupational therapy services. A referral from your GP, a medical specialist or your hospital treating doctor is required.

Occupational therapists are also involved in providing specialist services in programs like movement disorder clinics, behaviour support services, Dementia Australia's **At Home with Dementia** service or pain management programs. Discuss these services with members of your health care team, which may include your GP, for support with referrals.

Occupational Therapy Association (OTA) and Dementia Australia

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) and Dementia Australia collectively acknowledge and emphasise the pivotal role that occupational therapists play in supporting people living with dementia, and their formal and informal carers and family members. Occupational therapists are an essential feature of multidisciplinary practice and bring a unique skill set that addresses the cognitive, physical, and psychosocial wellbeing of those impacted by dementia. Taking a strengths-based and person-centred approach, occupational therapists empower people living with dementia to lead full and meaningful lives.

OTA and Dementia Australia are committed to advocating for improved health, disability and aged care systems that ensure people living with dementia, their families and carers, receive the necessary funding and support to access occupational therapy services. This includes raising awareness among people living with dementia and their families, about the significant role occupational therapy plays in dementia support and care.

OTA and Dementia Australia actively engage with government bodies to ensure adequate funding and awareness for occupational therapy services within the context of dementia care and to address the barriers and gaps in the systems for people living with dementia. Enhanced support at the governmental level is essential to ensure that people living with dementia can access the full range of occupational therapy services they need to live well for as long as possible.

To find out more about how occupational therapists can support Australians living with dementia, visit: otaus.com.au/about/about-ot



Scan the QR code
to find an OT



National Dementia Helpline

1800 100 500



For language assistance
call **131 450**

Find us online
dementia.org.au



Dementia Australia acknowledges funding from the Australian Government, State and Territory Governments, and the generous financial support of individuals and organisations.

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