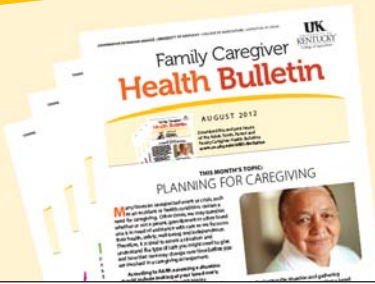


Family Caregiver Health Bulletin



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THIS MONTH'S TOPIC:

DEMENTIA AND VISION LOSS

Vision loss is a common sensory change that accompanies the aging process. Most people adapt to vision loss by using glasses, problem-solving or compensating. Environmental modifications, assistive technology and medications or medical procedures are also helpful. But vision impairment for people living with dementia can cause particular problems because their ability to understand and cope is affected by their memory loss. They may not know or remember that they are making visual mistakes. They may also have difficulty explaining what they have seen. As a caregiver, you can help them feel safe in their changing perceived reality by understanding the problems and intervening with help, support and reassurance.

Specific vision difficulties reported in dementia and Alzheimer's disease

In mid-stage dementia, it is not uncommon for a person's visual field to shrink to a 12-inch diameter, limiting peripheral vision on the top, bottom and



both sides. Such a limited field would be similar to living life while constantly looking through binoculars. As the dementia progresses, the visual field continues to decrease. **Additional visual difficulties can include trouble with:**

- color perception (loss of the blue, purple, green part of the spectrum)

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Better understanding the experience of a person with dementia can help caregivers provide quality care and support.

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- contrast discrimination
- depth and motion perception
- visual acuity
- object and facial recognition

Since a person with memory loss may not be aware of or able to articulate vision impairment, caregivers can watch for changes in everyday routines:

- inability to find an object even though it is right in front of the person
- difficulty moving around in familiar environments
- high-stepping over thresholds or shadows, thinking they signify a change of level
- difficulty problem solving visual illusion effects, such as determining how many steps there are or where the next step starts when going downstairs
- resisting walking on shiny flooring because it looks wet or slippery
- walking on the darkest patterns or shadows of flooring to avoid falling
- misinterpreting reflections in mirrors, windows or shiny surfaces
- refusal to go into a bathroom because of the reflection or assumed “stranger” in the mirror
- mistaking TV images for real people
- difficulty estimating depth when trying to accurately sit down in a chair or on the bed or toilet
- inability to find objects or places because of a lack of color contrast (for example, a white napkin on a white placemat)
- restlessness from visually over-stimulating environments

Vision impairment for people living with dementia can cause particular problems because their ability to understand and cope is affected by their memory loss.

What can a caregiver do?

A challenge for persons living with dementia, especially in the early to mid-stages is that they still have a sense of purpose. They want to complete things, but they are not sure how to complete them, which can create irritability and frustration. As caregivers, we can compound the stress when we point out errors and make the person with dementia feel as if he or she is not competent, when in fact, it is a visual processing problem. By better understanding the experience of a person with dementia, we have a better opportunity to provide quality care and support.

- Be patient
- Don't point out flaws and errors
- Set the person up for success
- Modify the environment

Environmental design modifications:

- Contrasting colors between walls and floors, doors and walls, stairs, toilets, directional signs, etc.
- Matte finish or low sheen on walls, furniture and floors to reduce glare
- Adjustable task lights in working areas
- Large numbers or picture buttons on telephones
- Large print newspapers, magazines, computers, watches, etc.
- Allow eyes time to adapt to light change when moving locations
- Properly light workspaces, hallways, stairwells, rooms

SOURCES:

- Alzheimer's Society. (2010). Visuoperceptual difficulties in dementia. <http://alzheimers.org.uk/>
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