

PHYSIOTHERAPY AND DEMENTIA



AUSTRALIAN
PHYSIOTHERAPY
ASSOCIATION



**Dementia
Australia®**

Dementia in Australia

Dementia is a common condition and the second leading cause of death in Australia. In 2022, up to 487,500 Australians are living with all forms of dementia and without a major medical breakthrough, this figure is projected to increase to 1,076,000 people by 2058. Dementia is a life-limiting condition that can have a significant impact on all aspects of a person's physical or mental health. People living with dementia in Australia need comprehensive health care, including allied health services, but access to these services is limited.



The physical impacts of dementia

Dementia often impacts a person's ability to move around and participate in activities of daily living. Each person with dementia will experience the condition differently but some of the physical problems associated with dementia include:

- slower reaction time
- weaker muscles
- poor co-ordination
- trouble doing more than one thing at a time – for example carrying a cup of tea while walking, and
- balance problems including falls.

Dementia can also have indirect physical consequences. For example, people living with dementia may experience visuospatial changes, resulting in mobility-related challenges with wayfinding, navigating spaces, and identifying objects including furniture. People with dementia can have complex changes in their brain that alter the processing of sensory input and the ability to use language to communicate their needs. Changes in communication may mean pain experienced by a person living with dementia is not identified or effectively managed.

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

Physiotherapy is an important part of a holistic post-diagnostic dementia support pathway

Physiotherapy has a broad scope of practice and can include:

- early post-diagnostic clinical care, to help optimise brain health, strength and balance through rehabilitation, exercise and physical activity
- training families or carers to help with enablement or reablement activities
- providing advice about gait aids such as walking sticks or walking frames
- providing advice about complicated movement issues including use of machines such as wheelchairs and mechanical hoists
- working with families or carers to address changed behaviours that may relate to unmet needs
- assessing non-verbal signs of pain and collaborating with other health professionals and carers to effectively manage pain and enhance quality of life
- providing clinical care and rehabilitation for other physical conditions, such as stroke or arthritis.

Physiotherapists can partner with people living with dementia to maximise their physical wellbeing through a wellness and enablement approach. Physiotherapists are experts in prescribing tailored, purposeful and meaningful activities and exercises and can work individually or as part of a comprehensive inter-disciplinary team to support the physical and cognitive needs of people living with dementia. Research has shown that physiotherapy can help improve the quality of life and independence of older Australians, including those living with dementia, by:

- improving motor skills such as gait and balance²
- reducing frailty
- reducing the number of falls³ and fractures⁴
- slowing cognitive decline⁵
- improving cognition, agitation, mood⁶

Early intervention with physiotherapy is the key to assessing, treating and achieving positive outcomes but studies have shown that access to physiotherapy is not offered in a timely manner for people with dementia.⁷



Access to physiotherapy for people living with dementia in Australia

Physiotherapists in Australia work across the full spectrum of health, aged and disability care including public and private hospitals, rehabilitation services, residential and community aged care, in private practices and community health centres. People living with dementia can use their private health insurance, or fully fund access to their local private physiotherapy practice for treatment. However, health care systems and funding of services are complex, difficult to navigate and often exclude people living with dementia in the following ways:

- Cognitive assessment clinics are often called 'memory clinics,' dismissing the physical characteristics of dementia. Limited inclusion of physiotherapists on these teams reduces the opportunity for early physiotherapy intervention.
- The Chronic Disease Management Program can be accessed by people living with dementia, but has a limited number of sessions that can also be used for other allied health services and often includes a gap payment to private practitioners.
- Funding for physiotherapy for people living in residential aged care is currently not prioritised so people with dementia in these settings have limited access to services resulting in unmet needs.
- Low physiotherapy staffing levels in acute hospitals means people living with dementia may have reduced mobility resulting in significant physical and functional decline.
- Physiotherapists, and referrers such as general practitioners, often have inadequate dementia knowledge and believe people living with dementia will not benefit from rehabilitation or are unable to participate effectively. This can result in reduced rehabilitation and exercise opportunities for dementia-related physical problems and other health issues.

Physiotherapists as dementia care leaders

A growing number of physiotherapists in Australia are passionate about physiotherapy care for people living with dementia and have developed their knowledge and clinical skills to provide high quality clinical care, education, and research in this key area of practice. Dementia-trained physiotherapists can make a valuable contribution to the holistic care of people of all ages living with dementia. However, there is limited professional or financial support in the health and aged care sectors to facilitate learning and career pathways in relation to physiotherapy and dementia. Dementia education must be included in entry-level physiotherapy education and the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) is committed to supporting professional development for physiotherapists in this area. Engagement with leading educators in the sector and the provision of high quality professional development offerings is essential to ensure expertise in dementia care increases to meet the needs of the growing number of people living with dementia in Australia.

² Hewitt J. (2018). Progressive Resistance and Balance Training for Falls Prevention in Long-Term Residential Aged Care: A Cluster Randomized Trial of the Sunbeam Program. *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association*, 19(4):361-369

³ Mak A, Delbaere K, Refshauge K, Henwood T, Goodall S, Clemson L, Hewitt J, Taylor ME. (2022). Sunbeam program reduces rate of falls in long-term care residents with mild to moderate cognitive impairment or dementia: subgroup analysis of a cluster randomized controlled trial. *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association*. Feb 20.

⁴ The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling NATSEM (2016) Economic Cost of Dementia in Australia 2016–2056 Harvey L, Mitchell R, Brodaty H, Draper B, Close J Differing trends in fall-related fracture and non-fracture injuries in older people with and without dementia. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics* 67: 61-67.

⁵ Alty J, Farrow M, Lawler K. (2020) Exercise and dementia prevention. *Practical Neurology*. Jan 21

⁶ Brett L, Traynor V, Steapley P. (2016) Effects of physical exercise on health and well-being of individuals living with a dementia in nursing homes: A systematic review. *Journal of American Medical Directors Association*;17:104-16

⁷ Laver, K.E., Crotty, M., Low, L.F. et al. (2020). Rehabilitation for people with dementia: a multi-method study examining knowledge and attitudes. *BMC Geriatrics*, 20, 531

Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) and Dementia Australia's Position

The APA and Dementia Australia recognise that physiotherapists play a critical role in the multidisciplinary health care team in maintaining the physical and psychological well-being of people living with dementia. We strongly support a wellness and enablement approach, with an emphasis on maintaining strengths and capacities and an individual's ability to live well with dementia for as long as possible.

The APA and Dementia Australia affirm the rights of people with dementia to receive timely and ongoing access to physiotherapy services and the need for appropriate funding to support those services. A concerted focus on dementia education in undergraduate physiotherapy courses and professional development in dementia-related training and education will make a significant contribution to improving access to high quality physiotherapy services to support people living with dementia in Australia.

