

# Dementia-friendly swimming sessions help patients and carers, study finds

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Credit: University of Nottingham

Specially organised 'dementia friendly' swimming sessions can be beneficial to people with dementia and their carers, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Nottingham and the Institute of Mental Health.

The team set out to find out what impact swimming sessions have on the lives of [people](#) with dementia and how they affect the experience of their carers. The project also explored how and in what ways swimming sessions at public pools can be made 'dementia friendly.'

The research, published in *Dementia*, was carried out with the help of the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) and Swim England who run a national project to improve access to swimming for people with dementia.

A group of people who attend dementia friendly swimming sessions at Clifton Leisure Centre in Nottingham took part in interviews with the research team over a period of seven weeks. The Alzheimer's Society helped the researchers with recruitment to the study via their network of patients, families and carers.

The interviews were designed to explore participants' experiences of the sessions and those of the people who look after them. The team also interviewed six members of staff at the leisure centre who were involved in running the sessions to record their experiences and ideas about best practice in swimming for [dementia patients](#).

Feedback from the participants, both the people with dementia, and their carers, was without exception positive. The comments described how much they enjoyed the sessions. For example, one person with dementia said: "It's been absolutely brilliant!"

The sessions also boosted the confidence of some people. One volunteer with dementia, a strong swimmer, described how he was normally shy and reserved but the sessions gave him the opportunity to develop his confidence and help other participants with their swimming. He told the researchers: "I felt sort of like...confidence in myself... to encourage her to keep going."

Restlessness and pacing are common behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia and can be difficult for carers to manage. One of the carers who took part in the swimming study said: "Giving him the exercise in the swimming pool has helped to calm him down and give him an outlet for his physical energy which usually causes him to pace the room for long periods of time."

Swimming instructors who gave interviews to the researchers showed empathy and insight into the struggles faced by people with dementia.

This enabled them to tailor their support for the sessions. One instructor said: "You can't hurry anything and I think you just have to be very flexible in your approach."

The research was carried out by two University of Nottingham medical students, Mary Swallow and Tanya Hobden, who were being supervised in this project by senior academics. Mary commented: "This was an amazing opportunity to gain insight into the lives of people with dementia and their families which showed us how the simplest of activities can make such a difference."

Professor of Dementia Research, Tom Dening, said: "Our study suggests there is huge potential for these specially organised swimming sessions to improve the quality of life of people with dementia and their carers. We already know that other forms of exercise are physically beneficial to this group of people, but swimming in particular can improve fitness with less strain on joints compared to land-based exercise. Our study allowed us to examine the personal experiences of those people with dementia who were able to tell us how they felt about the swimming sessions. They were overwhelmingly positive as were the comments from their relatives and carers.

"Swimming sessions reduced the sense of responsibility felt by carers, providing them with their own support network and the opportunity to have a break from caring, in the company of others in similar circumstances. The swimming itself was enjoyable for everyone and provided people with dementia the chance to exercise as well as giving them confidence and empowering them."

The study concludes that for most participants, meeting people in a similar situation as themselves was one of the most important benefits of the sessions, although one carer felt she did not want to socialise with other carers as she wanted to have a break from the [dementia](#) carer

environment. For most participants, the opportunity to have a regular event on the calendar and chance to get out of the home environment was valued.

**More information:** Tanya Hobden et al. Swimming for dementia: An exploratory qualitative study (innovative practice), *Dementia* (2018). DOI: [10.1177/1471301218768372](https://doi.org/10.1177/1471301218768372)

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