

What to Do When They Refuse to Shower

Purpose of This Cheatsheet

A shower doesn't fall apart all at once. It falls apart at a specific moment — the hallway, the buttons, the water, the hair. Find the moment you're stuck at and go straight to it. Swap in your person's name and make the lines your own.

3 Things Not to Do

These three feel like the obvious move, and all three make the next shower harder.

- 1. Show evidence.** The calendar, the smell, the dirty clothes. They can't take in proof of a problem they don't believe they have.
- 2. Use logic or reason.** "You'll feel better." "You have a doctor's appointment." Reason left before the shower did.
- 3. Force them to do it anyway.** You may win today's shower and lose the next ten — plus their trust in you at the bathroom door.

Before you do anything else

Rule out pain and cold. A sore shoulder, a UTI, or a chilly bathroom will beat every line on this cheatsheet. Ask two or three questions, wait 30 full seconds for each answer, and warm the room before you start.

The Three Moves Underneath All of This

Every section that follows is one of these three, applied to a different moment.

- 1. Show, don't tell.** Something to see, something to hold, something to follow.
- 2. Normalize, don't force.** Give them a job, and give them a why.
- 3. One step, not twenty.** One sentence, then wait.

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Before You Say a Word

Most of a good shower is set up before anyone walks into the bathroom.

- Warm the room first. Cold air ends more showers than anything you say.
- Lay everything out in order — soap, towel, clothes — so you're never turning away to hunt for something.
- Cover or remove the mirror. A stranger in the glass ends a shower fast.
- Pick their best time of day and keep it. Same time, same person, every time.
- Set out clothes they picked, or two options you're fine with either way.
- Decide before you start what "clean enough" is today. Twice a week and a sink wash counts.

Take away: *Win the shower in the hallway, not in the bathroom.*

Getting Them In

This is where most refusals happen — and where the "do you want to" question kills you.

Instead of: "Do you want to take a shower?"

Try: "Your shower's all warm and ready — let's go."

- **Hand them something first.** "Here — hold this for me." Then turn and walk. Hand first, talk second, then stop talking.
- **Give them a why that matters to them.** "The doctor's coming at two." · "Your granddaughter's stopping by." · "We can't sit down to dinner till we're washed up."
- **Ask for their help.** "Can you help me test the water? Tell me if it's too hot."
- **Wait for a natural reason.** "Whew, we worked up a sweat out there — let's rinse off real quick."
- **If they say no, say okay.** Walk away and come back in 15 to 30 minutes. Asking twice in a row turns a no into a fight.

Take away: *Lure them in. Don't convince them in.*

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Getting Undressed

They're not being difficult. Undressing in front of you is the part that costs them the most, and it's about twelve steps they can no longer sequence.

- Keep a towel or robe over their shoulders the whole time. Covered is calmer.
- Offer the same-gender helper if you have one. Ask them who they'd rather have.
- One item, one sentence: "Let's get this arm out." Then wait.
- Start with shoes and socks — easiest, least private, and it builds momentum.
- Switch to clothes that come off in one motion. Buttons and zippers cause more refusals than modesty does.
- Let them keep something on if they need to. Underwear in the shower is not a failure.

The line: "Let's keep you modest — I'll hold this up."

In the Water

A shower is about twenty steps. They can still do four of them.

- **Give them a job and keep it.** "I'll get your back, you do the rest." This is the workhorse line — it keeps them in charge of the private parts.
- **One step, one sentence, then 30 seconds of silence.** "Hold the soap." · "Now your arm." · "Good — the other one." · "All done. Here's your towel."
- **Never spray the face.** Use a handheld sprayer, low and aimed at the body.
- **Narrate before you touch.** "I'm going to wash your back now." Being touched without warning starts fights.
- **If they're scared, sit them down.** A shower chair takes the fear out of it faster than any sentence you can say.
- **If they freeze,** they didn't quit — they got lost. Back up one step and hand them the object again.

Take away: *Your silence is doing as much work as your words.*

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Hair

Hair is its own fight, and it's the one most worth taking out of the shower entirely.

- Wash it at the sink, or at the salon. Keeping water off the face solves most of it.
- Try dry shampoo or a no-rinse cap on the weeks it isn't worth it.
- If it must happen in the shower, tip the head back and use a visor or a folded washcloth over the eyes.
- Hair doesn't need washing as often as you think. Once a week is plenty.

Getting Out & Drying

They're tired now, and cold. This is where a good shower can still end badly.

- Have the warm towel and the clothes already in reach before the water goes off.
- Wrap first, dry second. Getting them covered fast matters more than getting them dry.
- Check the skin folds while you dry — under the arms, under the breasts, the groin.
- Lotion and a warm robe make the ending pleasant, which is what they'll remember next time.
- Ask them to model the outfit for you: "Will you model this for me so I can see how it looks?"

Take away: *How it ends is what they carry into the next one.*

Beyond the Shower

- **Teeth:** brush yours beside them. Mirroring does the instructing.
- **Nails:** after a warm soak, while they're eating or watching something.
- **Briefs:** "These are the ones I wear too — they're just easier." Replace the regular underwear rather than announcing a change.
- **Pads:** put it on a schedule instead of asking. Asking invites a no.

What to Do When They Refuse to Shower

If You Know the Reason, Start Here Instead

Found your reason in the **Why They Refuse to Shower Checklist**? Go straight to the fix.

1. **Pain or illness** — stop and call the doctor. Nothing here works on pain.
2. **Cold** — **Before You Say a Word** and **Getting Out & Drying**.
3. **Fear of falling** — **In the Water**. A chair, grab bars, grips.
4. **Control & embarrassment** — **Getting Them In** and **Getting Undressed**.
5. **Too complicated** — **In the Water**. One step, one sentence, then wait.

When It Falls Apart Anyway

- Stop. A shower is not worth a fight you'll both remember.
- Say okay and mean it. "You know what, let's do it later." Then leave the room.
- Come back in 15 to 30 minutes as if it never happened. They won't be holding the grudge — but they will be holding the feeling.
- Do a sink wash instead: face, hands, underarms, groin. That's most of what a shower was for.
- Write down where it fell apart while it's fresh, so next time you start one step earlier.

A Note Before You Go

Nothing works 100% of the time with everyone — after thousands of dementia patients and caregivers, these are simply what work the most often with the most people. Some days you'll do everything on this sheet and they still won't go, and that's okay. A missed shower is not a failure. The goal was never to get it perfect. It's to walk in with a few more tools than you had before, and to be a little kinder to yourself along the way.

Progress over perfection.