

Hoarding

Recognising the signs
and where to get help



Trusted
Information
Creator



Patient Information Forum

Thank you

Independent Age would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this guide was being developed, and those who reviewed the information for us.

What do you think?

We welcome your feedback on our publications. We will use your comments to help us plan future changes. If you would like to help us to develop our information products, you can join our Readers' Panel. For more information visit independentage.org/readers-panel or call **0800 319 6789**.

Other formats

If you need this information in a different format (such as large print or audio CD), please contact us.

Contact us

Call us on **0800 319 6789** or email advice@independentage.org

While some content may apply across the UK, generally our publications cover England. We make every reasonable effort to ensure that our information is accurate at the time of publication, but information can change over time and should not be used as a substitute for professional advice. Independent Age does not accept any liability for any loss, however caused, arising from the use of the information within this publication. The inclusion of other organisations does not constitute an endorsement from us.

The sources used to create this publication are available on request.

Contents

About this guide	2
1. What is hoarding?	3
2. How you might be affected	7
3. Where to get support	14
4. Ways to help yourself	23
5. How to help someone you're worried about	32

Date of publication:
March 2020

Next review date:
September 2021

About this guide

Most of us like to keep things that have special meaning for us but for some people this attachment to possessions can become a problem which seriously affects their lives. Hoarding can start at any age but it may become more deep-rooted and harder to manage in later life.

If you are affected, you may not want help and your wishes should be respected. However, if there is a risk of harm to you or someone else, outside agencies may have to get involved. This guide looks at what hoarding is, what might happen as a result, and where you can get support if you want it.

We spoke to older people about their experiences. Their quotes appear throughout.

In this guide you'll find references to our other free publications. You can order them by calling **0800 319 6789** or visiting **independentage.org/publications**.

What is hoarding?

Hoarding is when you collect a lot of things and you have difficulty letting go of them. The objects that you keep may not seem valuable to anyone else but you may feel distressed if anyone tries to remove them. You may be concerned about waste and want to hold on to things in case they are of use in future. You may believe that you are the only person who can dispose of them properly.

I think I can get rid of something but only if it's going to a good home. If I don't like how a place feels, I can't leave my things there.

The type of things hoarders collect varies but may include:

- clothes
- books, newspapers and magazines
- post
- packaging and containers
- food – including rotten or out-of-date items
- animals.

Digital hoarding of data, such as emails, photos and files is also becoming more common. This can become as difficult to manage as physical objects.



Many people collect things or live in conditions that other people consider messy or cluttered. What makes hoarding different is the attachment you have to the objects you keep and the impact that it has on your daily life. You may no longer have space for your collection and your home can become difficult to live in. For example, you may not be able to get into or use your kitchen or bathroom any more. This can then affect other aspects of your life, such as your ability to cook for yourself and eat healthy food or your hygiene.

**Space is now a real issue at home.
There are piles all over the house and
no room to move.**

Why do some people become hoarders?

There are many reasons why you may be affected – the causes of hoarding are not fully known. Sometimes people start hoarding after a stressful change in personal circumstances, such as retirement, bereavement or illness.

It may be connected to a trauma you've experienced, sometimes from childhood. If you tend to be reclusive or a perfectionist, you may be more susceptible. Most people who hoard live alone. There may be a very personal reason why you hoard that you are unwilling to share.

Hoarding can be a mental health condition in its own right – a hoarding disorder – or it might be a symptom of another illness, such as depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), dementia or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It can be a result of an alcohol or substance addiction, which may also have complex causes.

If you're worried about any of these issues, see chapters 3 and 4 for more details of where you can get support.

How you might be affected

2



Many people who hoard wouldn't describe themselves as hoarders. If you're concerned that you or someone you know may be a hoarder, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you attached to your belongings?
- Do your things help you to remember sentimental events or people who have been important in your life?
- Do you feel safe knowing that you have the things that you collect?

- Do you talk to your belongings or feel that they would be upset if you moved or got rid of them?
- Do you find it difficult to use the bathroom, sleep in your bed, cook or use rooms for their intended purpose because of the number of things you've saved?
- Do you feel worried or embarrassed about letting others into your home?
- Did you have difficult experiences or relationships as a child that may have contributed to your attachment to belongings?
- Have you experienced trauma, bereavement, abuse or neglect at any time in your life?
- Have you lost status or independence, because of retirement or ill health for example?

If you answered yes to most of those questions, you may have a hoarding disorder. Over time this could affect you in many ways.

Your feelings

- Certain objects that seem to have no value to others might hold special meaning for you, such as keepsakes from your children or items you associate with someone who has died. Throwing them away could give you strong feelings of loss or grief.
- Making decisions about what to keep and what to discard may make you feel anxious. You might feel guilty or fearful of making the wrong decisions.
- Many people who hoard feel ashamed. You may be afraid of what will happen if you seek help or worried about being a burden.
- If you have a health condition, feel lonely or you're on some types of medication, you may feel less motivated to make changes.
- You may not know where to start or where to go for support and could suffer from depression.

I don't invite my grandchildren to my home as it's not safe for them. I want to be able to but not until it's safe.

Hoarding can affect your relationships and lead to family conflicts. You may start to collect things because you're lonely but then become more socially isolated because of your hoarding tendencies. Some people who hoard become vulnerable to bullying by local people.

See chapter 4 for ways to help yourself cope with your feelings.



Your safety and wellbeing

In her later years, my mother hoarded newspapers, tinned foods and so on. I believe she did this for reassurance. She had lived in occupied France during the war and had lost everything. It was understandable but having lots of date-expired food was always a concern, as was the risk of fire, having so much combustible material in her house.

Some of the problems that you may experience in later life can become worse if your home is cluttered. You may be at increased risk of trips and falls. Mould, dust and rodent or insect infestations could aggravate existing health conditions. Mobility problems can make it harder to deal with clutter and may get worse if you're unable to easily move around your home.

Clutter is a fire hazard. If there is a fire, your collected items may make it more intense and it could spread quickly. You could find it difficult to get out if your escape routes are blocked. If you're worried, your local fire service can advise you on fire safety – see chapter 3.

Other possible consequences

It's difficult to find things and get round my house. It's also expensive buying stuff that I know I have but can't find.

Acquiring new items for your collection can be costly both in terms of time and money – if you buy lots of clothes for example – and some people who hoard find that they get into debt. If you have money worries, make sure you're claiming all the benefits you're entitled to. Our **Moneywise** guide suggests ways to boost your income and save money. See chapter 3 for organisations that can help if you're in debt.

If anyone comes to do any work, I'm petrified they will report me to the housing association. I don't invite people to my home as I'm ashamed and don't want them to see it.

If you don't let people in to carry out necessary repairs, your home may become unsafe. Your local council may have to investigate and take action if they think you're putting yourself or anyone else at risk. See chapters 3 and 5 for more information.

Where to get support

People who hoard often feel deeply ashamed and try to keep the problem hidden. If your hoarding is making you feel distressed or unwell, it's best to seek help early on. Remember that it's not your fault and you shouldn't be judged.

I do sort it and then it starts all over again and soon becomes the same because I have dealt with the symptom and not the problem.

Talk to your GP

The first step is to talk to your GP. If you find it difficult to raise the subject, you could use pictures to show the scale of the problem, such as a clutter image rating tool. You could also use

an ice breaker form, which has statements to help you explain your situation. You can get both of these from hoarding support organisations such as Help For Hoarders – see chapter 4.

Your GP might refer you to local mental health services or a psychiatrist or therapist who specialises in hoarding. If your hoarding is a symptom of another condition, you will probably be offered treatment for that first. You may need treatment for the underlying reasons for your hoarding, such as trauma or loss, before you can deal with your possessions.

You can refer yourself to NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services if you prefer. You can find contact details on [nhs.uk/service-search/Psychological-therapies-\(IAPT\)/LocationSearch/10008](https://nhs.uk/service-search/Psychological-therapies-(IAPT)/LocationSearch/10008) or ask your local Healthwatch for information (**0300 068 3000**, healthwatch.co.uk).

You could also contact your local council if you need care or support but your hoarding is making that difficult – see page 18.

Treatments

There are two main treatments for hoarding – psychological therapy and medication. There is no medication specifically for hoarding but it can help with anxiety or depression, for example.

The main psychological therapy is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which can help you to change the thoughts and feelings that lead you to hoard. It can take a long time, but CBT can be very effective. CBT may involve someone coming to your home to work with you on your possessions. Other types of talking therapies such as counselling may also be helpful.

If you're finding it difficult to get access to mental health services or you are not offered help for very long, see chapter 4 for other ways you can help yourself. You may also wish to make a complaint. See our factsheet **Complaints about care and health services**.

You could seek help privately, although this can be expensive. Ask your GP to recommend a therapist or contact the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BCAP) to find an accredited therapist ([01455 883300](tel:01455883300), bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists).



Support for other problems

You may want to seek help with underlying problems that contribute to your hoarding. For example:

- Cruse Bereavement Care ([0808 808 1677](tel:08088081677), [cruse.org.uk](https://www.cruse.org.uk)) – or see our guide **Coping with bereavement**
- support groups for addiction and dependency such as Alcoholics Anonymous ([0800 917 7650](tel:08009177650), [alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)) – or see our guide **Coping with alcohol and drug misuse**
- Stepchange ([0800 138 111](tel:0800138111), [stepchange.org](https://www.stepchange.org)) or National Debtline ([0808 808 4000](tel:08088084000), [nationaldebtline.org](https://www.nationaldebtline.org)) for debt advice.

If you're struggling to cope at home, ask the adult social services department at your local council for a free care needs assessment. This will work out what help you need and how you might be able to get care. You can find your council's contact details in the phone book or on [gov.uk/apply-needs-assessment-social-services](https://www.gov.uk/apply-needs-assessment-social-services). To find out more, see our guide **Getting help at home**.

If you need advice about benefits or social care, contact the Independent Age Helpline on **0800 319 6789** to arrange to speak to an adviser.



Staying safe at home

Your local fire service may be able to help you by giving advice on fire prevention, carrying out a Safe and Well visit – which may include advice on falls prevention and your health and wellbeing – and working with other organisations so you can get the help you need. You can find their contact details in the phone book or at [cfoa.org.uk](https://www.cfoa.org.uk). You can find out more in our **Home Safety** guide.

Your rights

Everyone has the right to respect for their private life and home, and to peaceful enjoyment of their possessions. However, hoarding can bring you into conflict with neighbours and might attract the attention of outside agencies, such as the council's environmental health department, or your landlord.

The environmental health team can take action if your home is posing a risk to health – either yours or other people's. For example, they may require you to deal with vermin and, if you don't, they can enter your home to carry out the work, which you will have to pay for. It doesn't matter whether you own your home or rent.

My biggest fear is that it will affect my tenancy and I will be homeless.

If you rent, your landlord has the right to inspect the condition of your home at a reasonable time but they must give you 24 hours written notice before they do this. Your landlord also has the right to enter your home to carry out necessary repairs if they give reasonable notice. If you don't let them in, they may take legal action or try to evict you.

For information about your rights under mental health law, contact Mind's Legal Line (**0300 466 6463, [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)**). If you've been threatened with eviction and you're in urgent need of advice, contact Shelter (**0808 800 4444, [england.shelter.org.uk/get_help/helpline](https://www.england.shelter.org.uk/get_help/helpline)**) or Citizens Advice (**03444 111 444, [citizensadvice.org.uk](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)**).

You may be able to get legal aid if you're threatened with eviction and you're on a low income. Contact Civil Legal Advice (0345 345 4345, gov.uk/civil-legal-advice) to find out if you're eligible. You can find a solicitor at <https://find-legal-advice.justice.gov.uk>.



Advocacy

If you find it difficult to express your views and wishes, you may benefit from the support of an independent advocate. An advocate can help you to put your views across, explain your options and make sure the right procedures are followed. In some situations, you may have a legal right to an advocate. Ask your local council for details of advocacy services in your area or contact Mind (**0300 123 3393**, **mind.org.uk**) or the Older People's Advocacy Alliance (**opaal.org.uk**). For more information, see our factsheet **Independent advocacy**.



Ways to help yourself

Living with hoarding can be very difficult but there are things you can do to help yourself cope.

Talk to someone

It can help to talk to someone you trust who won't judge you. If there is no one you feel you can open up to, you could try contacting a mental health helpline such as the Mind Infoline (0300 123 3393, mind.org.uk) or the Samaritans (116 123, samaritans.org). Or call The Silver Line, a free, confidential helpline for older people (0800 4 70 80 90, thesilverline.org.uk).

Join a support group

Sharing your problems with people who have similar experiences can be very helpful. A support group may be able to offer practical advice and encourage you to make changes if you've reached a point where you want to deal with the problem. Contact Mind for details of local support groups (0300 123 3393, mind.org.uk/about-us/local-minds) or Rethink (0300 500 927, rethink.org).

There are some organisations specifically for hoarders, although not all of them will have support groups in your area and they may charge for their services. You can download useful resources from their websites, such as the clutter image rating and ice breaker form to show your GP.

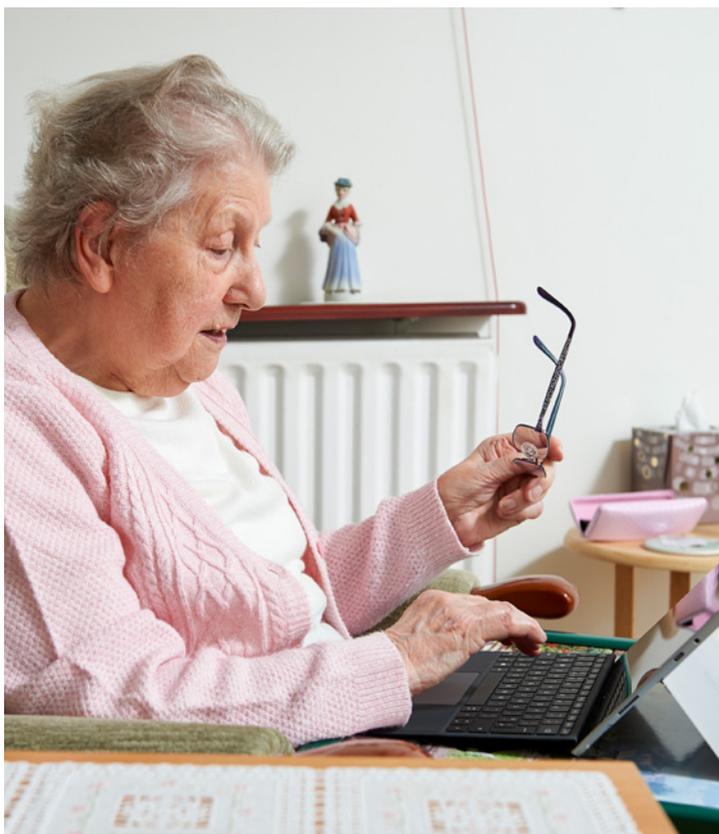
They include:

- Hoarding UK ([020 3239 1600](tel:02032391600), hoardinguk.org)
- Hoarding Disorders UK ([07950 364 798](tel:07950364798), hoardingdisordersuk.org)
- Help For Hoarders (helpforhoarders.co.uk).

Hoarding sometimes overlaps with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). If you're affected by both, you could contact OCD Action for help and advice ([0845 390 6232](tel:08453906232), ocdaction.org.uk).

You could also join an online support group or forum, such as Mind's Elefriends (elefriends.org.uk) or the Help For Hoarders forum (helpforhoarders.co.uk/forum).

The internet can be a good source of information and support but be careful online. Not everyone is who they say they are. For advice on staying safe online, see our webpage independentage.org/information/personal-life/staying-safe-online.



Take small practical steps

Once you've addressed the issues that have led to your hoarding, you may feel ready to start making changes within your home.

- Don't try to do too much – it can feel overwhelming. Half an hour may be long enough. You could set a timer.

Don't butterfly from one thing to another. Concentrate on what you're doing and stick to the task.

- Give yourself simple goals. It might help to focus on one item at a time – for example, papers or clothes – or one small area, such as a box or a cupboard.
- If you make a commitment to sort things out, try to stick to it.
- Write down how you feel and make a note of stressful events that make you want to acquire new things. This can help you recognise what triggers your hoarding.

Take photos of what you want to get rid of. That way you still have it.

- Once you've made the decision to let go of something, do it quickly.
- Give yourself goals to work towards that aren't hoarding-specific – for example, inviting a friend to dinner or a visit from your grandchildren.
- Celebrate your successes.

Ask someone you trust to help you but make sure they understand the best way to do this. For example, they shouldn't throw things out without helping you make the decision first.

Hoarding UK has a useful booklet called **The Basics**, with guidelines to help you deal with your hoarding. You can download it from hoardinguk.org/abouthoarding.

You could consider using a decluttering service. You can find one on the Association of Professional Declutterers and Organisers website apdo.co.uk or look in the phone book. Make sure that they understand hoarding and will work with you to decide what to discard.

I hoard and my daughter helped me to get rid of a lot of things which I did not use or need, especially clothes that I hadn't worn for years. She talked me through the process and then helped me take things to the charity shop, which I had been unable to do before.

Look after yourself

Your physical health can affect how you feel so it's important to take care of yourself. Make sure you get enough sleep, eat a healthy diet and try to stay active.

Find ways to relax and deal with stress.

Moodzone on the NHS website has a series of audio guides that can help you manage stress [nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/moodzone-mental-wellbeing-audio-guides](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/moodzone-mental-wellbeing-audio-guides).

Try to increase your social connections and do activities you enjoy that don't involve getting more things. If you can, spend time outside and take part in community activities. This can increase your confidence and wellbeing. Our guide **If you're feeling lonely** has suggestions for ways to stay connected.



Irene, 63

“When I was growing up, money was tight. They say that birds starved when they’re young are more likely to be fat when they’re older and I think that has something to do with the way I collect belongings. I rewarded myself with nice things when I had the money.

“My family lived in the same house for 70 years. When I moved in with my partner, leaving that house was like going through a bereavement. The move was so hard. My family’s possessions had filled the loft and three big bedrooms and I brought it all with me, as well as my own things. I know that all of these things that are precious to me are seen as knick-knacks no one wants any more – everyone is knick-knacked out! But I want anything I get rid of to go to a good home.

“Some of the things I’ve brought, like plate collections, cost a considerable amount of money but now they’re worthless and it’s an overwhelming feeling. I don’t want them to go to landfill. I would prefer them to go to a museum. If something is 100 years old, I don’t want it to be trashed.

"I had a cancer diagnosis a few years ago and I thought about the possibility of life coming to an end and the embarrassment of people having to sort out my things. I knew then that I had put off getting rid of the clutter too many times.



Picture posed by model

"My main aim now is to tackle a little area at a time. Sometimes I tell myself that if I do some decluttering I will have a reward at the end, like watching my favourite TV programme, but then I find I don't need the reward. The tidying is quite therapeutic.

"Phone calls with others who are struggling to let go of things help to motivate me. For some reason, after these chats I don't feel so attached to things.

"I've been donating to a local charity shop. They write to thank me for donations and for the amount raised. I think this is a good way of coping with clutter."

How to help someone you're worried about

If you're worried about someone, start by talking to them and explain your concerns. Try to encourage them to see their GP. Be sensitive – what seems to have no value to you may have great significance to the person you're trying to help. Focus on the person and not the clutter and their living space.

Offer your support

**Tidying doesn't deal with the problem
– it just tidies things.**

Television programmes and newspaper articles about hoarding often over-simplify the problem. Attempts to deal with it by only calling in decluttering and cleaning services usually fail

and can be very traumatic. Hoarding is a complex problem and making changes can take a long time.

Think about the language you use to describe their possessions. If the person talks about their collection or their things, try to use the same words and don't use negative terms like rubbish or junk. Don't touch their belongings without permission.

Help in practical ways by suggesting turning items into cash, involving them in car boot sales or giving to those in need. My mother could buy into this and was prepared to let things go on this basis.

Listen and offer practical and emotional support if you can. Appreciate the small things they achieve.

My stuff is like a wall – it keeps me safe. I'm not having anyone come and take it away. I like how safe it makes me feel.

Respect the person you're trying to help. They may not want to change and you may have to accept that you're not able to help.



Seeking outside help

Whatever help there is has to help me stay in control.

Hoarding can lead to self-neglect and other health issues. If you're concerned about someone's wellbeing, contact the adult safeguarding team at their local council. The council has a duty to investigate in certain circumstances. After making enquiries, they may decide to take further action to protect that person from abuse or neglect.

A range of organisations may need to get involved, including their GP, mental health services, the fire service and environmental health.

If you need advice about safeguarding, call our Helpline on **0800 319 6789** to arrange to speak to an adviser. See our guide **Staying in control** for more information.

Our free advice guides

You may be interested in...



If you're feeling lonely

Ways to overcome loneliness.



Living well with long-term health conditions

How to manage your condition and get the support you need.



Coping with bereavement

How to recognise the signs, where to find support and how to help yourself.

Our practical, jargon-free advice guides give you the information you need to get the most out of older age.

To find out about our full range of guides and order copies, call 0800 319 6789 or visit independentage.org/publications

The information in this guide applies to England only.

If you're in Wales, contact Age Cymru ([0800 022 3444](tel:08000223444), ageuk.org.uk/cymru) for information and advice.

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland ([0800 12 44 222](tel:08001244222), ageuk.org.uk/scotland).

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI ([0808 808 7575](tel:08088087575), ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland).

We want the UK to be the best place to grow older and we have ambitious targets to increase the number of older people we help and the difference we make. We receive no state funding and rely on income from individuals, trusts and other sources to continue providing our services to hundreds of thousands of older people in need.

Visit independentage.org to make a secure online donation and find out about other ways to support us. Alternatively, you can call us on [020 7605 4223](tel:02076054223) or email supporters@independentage.org



About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

For more information, visit our website **independentage.org**

Call us for information or to arrange free, impartial advice from an adviser. Lines are open 8.30am – 6.30pm Monday to Friday. Freephone **0800 319 6789** or email **advice@independentage.org**



**Independent
Age**

Independent Age
18 Avonmore Road
London
W14 8RR

T 020 7605 4200
E charity@independentage.org
www.independentage.org
Helpline 0800 319 6789

Independent Age is the operating name of the Royal United Kingdom Beneficent Association
Registered charity number 210729 (England and Wales) SC047184 (Scotland)



Like us: Independent Age



Follow us: @independentage



Follow us: independentage



Subscribe: IndependentAge