



**Independent
Age**



Hoarding

**Recognising the signs
and where to get help**



Thank you

We would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this guide was being developed, and those who reviewed it for us. Our special thanks go to Mind for their expert knowledge during the review.

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

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Contents

About this guide	2
1. What is hoarding?	3
2. How you might be affected	8
3. Where to get support	14
4. Ways to help yourself	25
5. How to help someone you're worried about	32
Irene's story	36

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We spoke to older people about their experiences. Their quotes appear throughout. We have changed the names of some of the interviewees who wished to be anonymous. Some of the images seen throughout this guide are posed by friends of Independent Age.

The PIF TICK is the UK-wide Quality Mark for Health Information.

About this guide

Many of us like to keep things that have special meaning – for some of us, though, the number of possessions we have and our attachment to them can seriously affect our lives.

Hoarding can start at any age, but it may become more noticeable, deep rooted and harder to manage in later life. You might not recognise that you have a hoarding problem, or you might be worried that if you ask for help, your things will be taken away.

Sometimes outside agencies may have to get involved if there is a risk of harm to you, someone else or an animal, but your wishes should still be respected.

This guide looks at what hoarding is, what might happen as a result and where you can get support if you want it.



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



1. What is hoarding?

Hoarding is when you have a lot of things that you have difficulty letting go of and they cause unmanageable clutter.

1. What is hoarding?

The objects that you keep mean a lot to you, even if other people don't think they're valuable. You may feel distressed if anyone tries to remove them.

There may be lots of reasons why you keep things. They might bring back good memories. You might think you'll be able to use them later or feel it's wasteful to get rid of them. You may believe that you are the only person who can dispose of them properly.

There are many different things you might hoard. They may include:

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

If you're unable to look after an animal properly because of your hoarding, animal welfare agencies may get involved.

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 – you might lose track of important files, for example. Or you may buy extra storage and other devices, which can be costly and add to the clutter.

Many of us like to keep special things and we all have different standards of what we think is 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.

“ 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.

1. What is hoarding?

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

You might not have enough space for your things and they may cause health or safety problems – for example, you may not be able to get into or use your kitchen or bathroom. This can then affect other aspects of your life, such as your ability to cook for yourself and eat healthy food, or your hygiene.

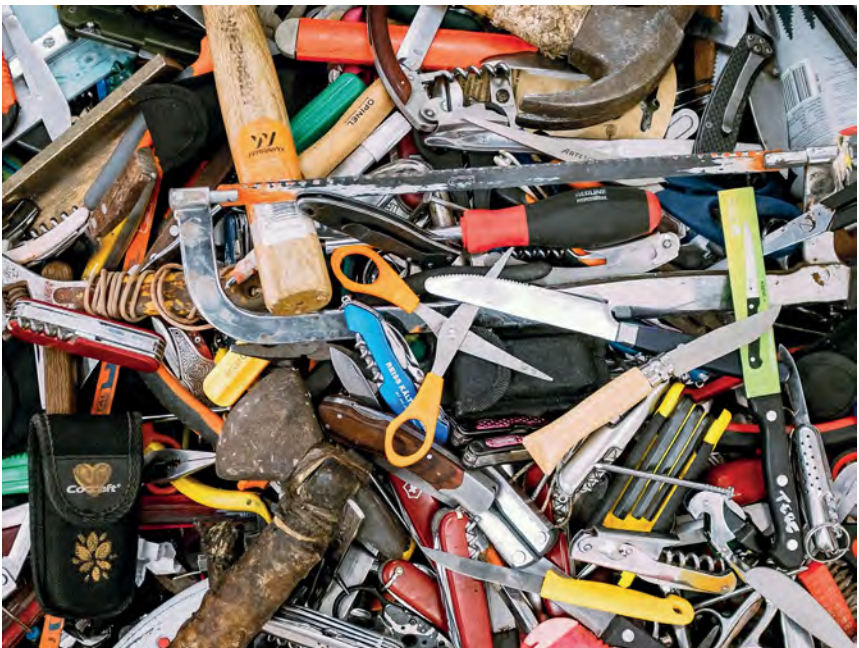
Why you might hoard

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. Most people who hoard live alone. There may be very personal reasons why you hoard that you're not comfortable sharing.

Hoarding can be a mental health condition in its own right – a hoarding disorder – or it might be a symptom of another condition, such as depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), dementia or a brain injury. Hoarding may also be part of an alcohol or drug addiction, which can also have complex causes.

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





2. How you might be affected

Many people who hoard wouldn't describe themselves as hoarders.

If you're concerned that you or someone you know may be hoarding, consider the following questions:

- Are you attached to your belongings?
- Do you connect your belongings to memories or people in your life, no matter what the item is?
- Do your things make you feel safe?
- 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?

2. How you might be affected

If you're affected by some of these things and they cause you distress, you can speak to your GP about getting help – see **chapter 3**.

Your feelings

Hoarding can affect your emotions in different ways.

- Certain objects that seem to have no value to others might hold special meaning for you. 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.

“ 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.

- 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, which can feel overwhelming.
- You may experience depression or anxiety because of the hoarding, or you might hoard because of these feelings.

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



2. How you might be affected

Your relationships

Hoarding can affect your relationships and lead to family conflicts. Getting new items and holding on to your possessions might comfort you, but could also make you more isolated.

Some people who hoard become vulnerable to bullying by local people.

“ 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.

Your safety and wellbeing

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 can also be a fire hazard and make it more difficult to leave your home in an emergency. If you're worried, your local fire service can advise you on fire safety – see **chapter 3**.

Organisations like the local council may ask to see your home if they are worried that it might be unsafe because of hoarding. You have rights in this situation – see **chapter 3** for more information.



3. Where to get support

Hoarding might make you feel ashamed and you may try to keep it hidden. If hoarding is making you feel distressed or unwell, there is help available.

“ 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.

Remember that hoarding is not your fault and you shouldn't be judged.

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 these resources from hoarding support organisations such as Help For Hoarders – see **chapter 4**.

If you wish, your GP might refer you to local mental health services, or a psychiatrist or therapist who specialises in hoarding.

3. Where to get support

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.

In England, 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 19**.



Treatments

The main treatment for hoarding is psychological therapy. You might also be offered medication. There is no medication specifically for hoarding disorder, but sometimes medication can help if you experience another condition as well, such as depression or anxiety.

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 they don't offer help for long, see **chapter 4** for ways you can help yourself.



You may also wish to make a complaint. See our factsheet **Complaints about health services**.

3. Where to get support

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**, bacp.co.uk/search/therapists).

For services in Scotland, contact COSCA (**01786 475140**, cosca.org.uk/our-services/find-counsellor/find-a-counsellor).

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**, cruse.org.uk) or Cruse Scotland (**0808 802 6161**, crusescotland.org.uk)
- support groups for addiction and dependency such as Alcoholics Anonymous (**0800 917 7650**, alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk).



See our guides **Coping with bereavement** and **Understanding alcohol and drug misuse** for more information.

If you're struggling to cope at home, you could 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**.



To find out more, see our guide **Getting help at home**.

Acquiring new things can be costly both in terms of time and money. Some people who hoard find that they get into debt. Contact Stepchange (**0800 138 1111, [stepchange.org](https://www.stepchange.org)**) or National Debtline (**0808 808 4000, [nationaldebtline.org](https://www.nationaldebtline.org)**) for debt advice.

If you have money worries, make sure you're claiming all the benefits you're entitled to.

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

3. Where to get support



Our **Moneywise** guide suggests ways to boost your income and save money.



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 give you advice on fire prevention. Even if you feel you can't address all your clutter, you could consider making parts of your home safer.

You could ask for a Safe and Well visit – which may include advice on preventing falls and your health and wellbeing, too. The fire service might work with other organisations so you can get the help you need. You can find the fire service's contact details in the phone book or at **cfoa.org.uk**.



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 might become involved if your home is posing a risk to your health or other people's. They should speak to you first about what they think needs to be done to your home, such as pest control or repairs.

If you rent, your landlord has the right to inspect the condition of your home at a reasonable time, but they must give you at least 24 hours' written notice before they do this.

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

3. Where to get support

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**). If you've been threatened with eviction and you're in urgent need of advice, contact Shelter:

- England and Scotland – **0808 800 4444**
- Wales – **08000 495 495**
- **shelter.org.uk**

or Citizens Advice:

- England – **0800 144 8848**
- Wales – **0800 702 2020**
- Scotland – **0800 028 1456**
- **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 qualify.

You can find a solicitor in England and Wales at **find-legal-advice.justice.gov.uk**. In Scotland, contact the Law Society of Scotland (**0131 226 7411**, **lawscot.org.uk**).



3. Where to get support

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:

- the Older People's Advocacy Alliance (**opaal.org.uk**)
- the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (**0131 510 9410**, **siaa.org.uk**)
- your local Community Health Council in Wales (**029 2023 5558**, **boardchc.nhs.wales/your-local-chc**).



For more information, see our factsheet
**Helping you get your voice heard:
Independent advocacy.**



4. Ways to help yourself

Living with hoarding can be difficult, but there are things you can try that may help you cope.

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 feel ready to do this.

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). In Scotland, contact the Scottish Association for Mental Health (**0344 800 0550**, samh.org.uk).

There are some organisations specifically for hoarding support, although not all of them will have support groups in your area. They may charge for some of their services. You can find useful resources on their websites, such as the clutter image rating tool and an ice breaker form to show your GP – see **page 15**.

These organisations include:

- Hoarding UK (**020 3239 1600**, hoardinguk.org)
- Hoarding Disorders UK (**0330 133 2310**, hoardingdisordersuk.org)
- Help For Hoarders (helpforhoarders.co.uk).

4. Ways to help yourself

Hoarding sometimes overlaps with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). If you're affected by both, you could contact OCD Action for help and advice (**0300 636 5478**, **ocdaction.org.uk**).

You could also join an online support group or forum, such as Mind's Side by Side (**mind.org.uk/information-support/side-by-side-our-online-community**) 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/get-advice/staying-safe/internet-safety**.

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.

- Do as much as you feel able to – it can feel overwhelming to do too much at once. You could set a timer for the length of time you feel comfortable with.
- 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. You might find it helpful to schedule cleaning time.
- Keep track of how you feel. You might want to make a note of stressful events that make you want to acquire new things. This can help you recognise what triggers your hoarding.
- 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.

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

4. Ways to help yourself

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

You could consider using a decluttering service, but you will usually have to pay for this. You can find one through hoarding charities, your local council or 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. The NHS website has a series of mental wellbeing audio guides that can help with feelings such as low mood or anxiety at **[nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/mental-wellbeing-audio-guides](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/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.



5. 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

Television programmes and newspaper articles about hoarding often oversimplify 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 they talk 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.
- Listen and offer practical and emotional support if you can. Appreciate the small things they achieve.
- 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 in the way you want.

5. How to help someone you're worried about



“ 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.

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

Seeking outside help

Hoarding can lead to self-neglect and other health and safety issues. If you're worried about someone's wellbeing, contact the adult safeguarding team at their local council. Where possible, talk to the person you're concerned about first. It can be distressing to involve the council without their knowledge.

The council has a duty to investigate in certain circumstances. After making enquiries, they may decide to take further action to protect the 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.



Irene's story

"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.

"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."

About Independent Age

At Independent Age, we want more people in the UK to live a happy, connected and purposeful later life. That's why we support people aged over 65 to get involved in things they enjoy. We also campaign and give advice on the issues that matter most: health and care, money and housing.

For information or advice – we can arrange a free, impartial chat with an adviser – call us on freephone **0800 319 6789** (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 6.30pm) or email us at **advice@independentage.org**.

You can also support this work by volunteering with us, joining our campaigns to improve life for older people experiencing hardship, donating to us or remembering us in your will.

For more information, visit **independentage.org** or call us on **0800 319 6789**.



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