

## Wandering behavior: Preparing for and preventing it

Alzheimer's disease causes millions of Americans to lose their ability to recognize familiar places and faces. Up to 60 percent of those with dementia will wander. And people can wander or become confused about their location at any stage of the disease, even in the early stage. Although common, wandering can be dangerous — even life-threatening. The following information can help caregivers and family members prepare for and prevent wandering behavior:

### Signs of wandering behavior

- Returning from a regular walk or drive later than usual.
- Forgetting how to get to familiar places.
- Trying to fulfill former obligations, such as going to work.
- Trying to “go home” even when at home.
- Acting restless, pacing or making repetitive movements.
- Having difficulty locating familiar places like the bathroom, bedroom or dining room.
- Asking the whereabouts of current or past friends and family.
- Acting as if doing a hobby or chore, but nothing gets done.
- Appearing lost in a new or changed environment.

### Tips to reduce wandering

The following strategies may help lower the chances of wandering.

- Carry out daily activities. Having a routine can provide structure.
- Identify the most likely times of day that wandering may occur. At those times, plan activities such as exercise, which can help reduce anxiety, agitation and restlessness.
- Offer reassurance if the person feels lost, abandoned or disoriented. Use communication focused on validation and refrain from correcting the person. For example, “We’re staying here tonight. We’re safe and I’ll be with you.”
- Ensure all basic needs are met (e.g., hunger, thirst, toileting).
- Avoid busy places that are confusing and can cause disorientation (e.g., shopping malls, grocery stores).
- If night wandering is a problem, make sure the person has restricted fluids two hours before bedtime and has gone to the bathroom just before bed.

### Prepare your home

Based on the individual needs and behaviors of the person with dementia, the following suggestions may be helpful in preventing wandering.

- Use night lights throughout the home.
- Place locks out of the line of sight. Install slide bolts at the top or bottom of doors.
- Cover door knobs with cloth the same color as the door. Use childproof knobs.
- Camouflage doors by painting them the same color as the walls. Cover them with removable curtains or screens.
- Use black tape or paint to create a two-foot black threshold in front of the door.
- Place warning bells above doors.

- Use monitoring devices that signal when a door is opened.
- Place a pressure-sensitive mat at the door or person's bedside to alert you to movement.
- Put hedges or a fence around the patio, yard or other outside common areas.
- Use safety gates or brightly colored netting to bar access to stairs or the outdoors.
- Consider providing an easily accessible recliner or geriatric chair for the individual to sit and rest.
- Monitor noise levels to help reduce excessive stimulation.
- Create indoor and outdoor common areas that can be safely explored.
- Label all doors with signs or symbols to explain the purpose of each room.
- Secure trigger items that a person would not go out with out, such as a coat, hat, pocketbook, keys and wallet
- Avoid leaving a person with dementia alone in a car.

### **Planning ahead**

- Enroll the person in MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return® and make sure MedicAlert + Safe Return always has a recent photo and updated medical information for the person.
- Ask neighbors, friends and family to call if they see the person alone or dressed inappropriately.
- Keep a recent, close-up photo on hand to give to police, should the need arise.
- Know your neighborhood. Pinpoint dangerous areas near the home, such as bodies of water, open stairwells, dense foliage, tunnels, bus stops and roads with heavy traffic.
- Is the individual right- or left-handed? Wandering generally follows the direction of the dominant hand.
- Keep a list of places where the person may wander to, such as past jobs, former homes or a church or restaurant.

### **Resources**

- MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return® (877.572.8566 or [alz.org/safety](http://alz.org/safety)).

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