

Wandering

Understanding why this occurs and how to prevent

Wandering is common among people with dementia and can be dangerous. Research tells us that three out of five persons will wander. They may not remember their name or address, and can become disoriented, even in familiar places. The risk of becoming lost can occur in the early stages of dementia, or later on in the disease. You will need to be prepared for this to happen. A variety of strategies need to be used to help ensure the safety of a person with dementia.

Some behaviour changes that may lead to wandering:

- Returns from a regular walk or drive later than usual.
- Tries to fulfill former obligations, such as going to work.
- Tries or wants to "go home," even when at home.
- Has difficulty locating familiar places like the bathroom, bedroom or dining room.
- Not dressing for the weather.
- Pacing, looking confused or disoriented.
- Repeating the same question within a short period of time.

Possible causes of wandering:

- **Changed environment:** May feel uncertain and disoriented in a new environment such as a new house or day respite program.
- **Loss of memory:** May forget where they were going or why. They may forget that their partner has told them that they were going out for a while and set off in search of them.
- **Excess energy:** May be a way of using up excess energy and may indicate that the person with dementia needs more regular exercise.
- **Searching for the past:** May wander off in search of someone, or something, relating to their past or looking for something familiar.

- **An expression of boredom/loneliness:** Find it harder and harder to concentrate for any length of time. Wandering may be their way of keeping occupied.
- **Confusing night with day:** May suffer from insomnia, or wake in the early hours and become disoriented.
- **Continuing a habit:** May be used to walking long distances or had a very active work history and may simply wish to continue doing so.
- **Agitation:** Can cause some people to pace up and down or to wander off with no apparent purpose.
- **A job to perform:** May be related to a former role such as going to work in the morning or being home for the children in the afternoon.
- **Health reasons:** Such as pain or discomfort or side effects of medications.

Using the ABC problem solving approach

Antecedent:

First, try to identify the trigger or what is causing the behaviour.

- **Environment:** too much/too little stimulation
- **Physical:** infection, pain, conflict, not enough exercise
- **Psychological:** bored, depressed, lonely, habit, frightened, past experience

Behaviour:

- What form did the wandering take? Was it agitated, restless? Is it actually a problem?

Consequence:

- Why was the person wandering? Do you need a consult to specialty services?
- How can you change the trigger/cause to better manage the behaviour?

When a person wanders

When a person with dementia goes missing, police view it as an emergency. This is because research shows that half of the people with dementia who go missing for 24 hours or more will end up seriously injured or dead.

- If person is missing, call 911. The police are trained to search for persons with dementia.
- Have your Identification Kit ready for the police so that they can begin to search immediately.

Resource: **"Finding Your Way Kit"**
www.alzheimer.ca/en/niagara/Finding-Your-Way

- If they have left their home, look for the person in their usual haunts (e.g., corner store, park).
- Use distraction. Be calm, reassuring, and avoid confrontation.
- 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. Also, use night lights throughout the home.

Safety measures that you could try in the home:

- Camouflage doors by painting them the same color as the walls, or cover them.
- Cover knobs with cloth the same color as the door or use childproof knobs.
- Use devices that signal when a door or window is opened. This can be as simple as a bell placed above a door or as sophisticated as an electronic home alarm.
- Provide supervision.
- Never lock the person with dementia in at home alone or leave him or her in a car without supervision.
- Use of Identification Cards inside coat pockets that contain the person's address.
- Let neighbors know that the person with dementia tends to wander. Ask them to alert you immediately if the person is seen alone and on the move.

Reassure the person if he or she feels lost, abandoned or disoriented. If the person with dementia wants to leave to "go home" or "go to work," use effective

communication skills rather than correcting the person. For more information, refer to Alzheimer Society publication, **"Day to Day Series: Communication"** available at www.alzheimerniagara.ca/resources

How to prevent

Wandering can happen even if you are the most diligent of caregivers. The precautions you take will depend on the personality of the person with dementia, how well they are able to cope in certain situations, their reasons for wandering, and whether they live in a potentially dangerous or safe and secure environment. Here are some strategies for your consideration:

- Reduce the number of objects in sight which may act as a reminder to the person to wander such as handbags, coats, mail for posting and work clothing.
- Keep car keys out of sight.
- Avoid busy places that are confusing and can cause disorientation such as shopping malls.
- Assess for pain or other unmet needs that may be making the person restless, such as hunger, thirst, or need for toilet.
- Identify the most likely times of day that wandering may occur and plan activities at that time. Activities and exercise can reduce anxiety, agitation and restlessness.
- Use clocks to help orient to the time of day. Provide written reminders to reassure the person with dementia about daily events.
- A physical check-up and review of medications will help identify whether illness, pain or discomfort has triggered the wandering
- Register person in the MedicAlert® Safely Home® program.

www.medicalert.ca/Safely-Home

MedicAlert® Safely Home® is a nationwide program designed to help identify the person who is lost and assist in a safe return home. Members receive an engraved identification (over 100 styles of IDs available including bracelets, necklaces, watches and more), which allows police and emergency responders to quickly identify the person who has wandered and bring the family back together.

Call 1-855-581-3794 for more information.

Things to remember

Wandering can be dangerous for the person with dementia. Make sure that you use a variety of strategies to ensure their safety. The Alzheimer Society can help by providing you with information and support.

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Further information on this topic

Visit the following websites:

- www.alzheimerniagara.ca
- www.alzheimerbc.org
- www.alz.org

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