

Dementia and the Risk for Getting Lost

Any person that has memory problems and is able to walk is at risk for wandering and getting lost. Wandering can happen at any time. Sometimes a person may get lost because they are, or become, disoriented. Some people wander because they are confused or frightened. Wandering is not necessarily a problem unless the person is at risk for getting injured, being taken advantage of, or getting lost.

IF	THEN
Your loved one with dementia can get around by themselves	<p>Prepare for the possibility that they may wander and get lost:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep a recent, close-up photograph or video of the person in an accessible place, such as your wallet or cell phone. • Inform family, friends, paid caregivers, and neighbors that the person is at risk for wandering and getting lost; ask that they keep an eye out for the person and alert you if they see them out and about on their own. • Inform local public servants and business owners, such as the police, fire department, and store clerks, that the person is at risk for wandering and getting lost, and make sure they have your phone number. • Make a list of likely places where the person may wander in case you need to search for them (past jobs, former homes, places of worship, or favorite restaurants). • Consider using an alarm, chime, or bell to alert you when the person is exiting a room or leaving home unattended. • Try to provide enough supervision to keep the person safe; consider hiring an in-home caregiver or enrolling the person in a day program. • Try to keep the person engaged with a familiar routine each day, since unexpected changes and over- or under-stimulation can be a trigger for wandering.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider enrolling the person in the MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return® program at 1-800-625-3780. • Consider getting the person an ID bracelet or necklace with your contact information on it. • Consider using a GPS tracking device or smartphone application that uses satellite technology to locate missing persons carrying or wearing a sensor device (i.e., shoe insert, watch, or anklet).
IF	THEN
<p>Your loved one is actively trying to leave, for example, to “go home” even though they are at home,</p> <p>OR</p> <p>“Go to work” even though they no longer work</p>	<p>Environmental Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hide environmental ‘exit cues’ or ‘trigger items,’ such as keys, shoes, jackets, hats, and purses. • Simplify the environment; reduce clutter, crowding, and background noise. Some television programs can be distressing. • Try placing a large “DO NOT ENTER” sign on exit doors. • Camouflage exit doors by painting them the same color as the walls, or covering them with a removable curtain or screen. • Cover knobs with cloth the same color as the door or use childproof knobs. • Do not lock a person with dementia in the home or in a car unattended. • Do not try to physically restrain a person with dementia unless you are attempting to protect them or others from immediate harm (such as getting hit by oncoming traffic). <p>Communication Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid trying to convince the person that they are already home or that they no longer work. This will lead to an argument and make the person more insistent about what they believe to be true.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to go along with what the person is saying, and guide them to something else without letting them realize they are being redirected. • Remember to be calm and reassuring instead of controlling. • Try making an emotional connection with the person in that moment. • Use communication that is supportive and focused on distraction, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>“What was it like growing up in your house?”</i> ○ <i>“What is your favorite room in the house?”</i> ○ <i>“We can leave after lunch. Can you help me set the table?”</i> ○ <i>“I love you. This is hard. We are going to get through this together.”</i>
IF	THEN
<p>If your loved one is missing and you cannot find them</p>	<p>Call 911 and let them know that a “vulnerable adult” with dementia is missing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are enrolled, call MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return® program at 1-800-625-3780. • Write down what the person was wearing. • Call someone to help you (family, friend, or neighbor). Walk or drive around the block or the immediate area. If possible, have somebody stay at home so that they can answer the telephone and be there in case the person returns. • Have the person’s most recent photo and medical information ready for police. • Gather your list of places that the person may wander—past jobs, former homes, places of worship, restaurants, or bars. • Check dangerous areas near the home, such as bodies of water, open stairwells, dense foliage, tunnels, bus stops, and roads with heavy traffic.

IF	THEN
<p>The person tries to leave because they are frightened and agitated</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay calm. Consider calling a neighbor or friend to be on standby in case you need help. • Avoid running after them or trying to hold them back unless there are obvious hazards, such as traffic or harsh weather. Chasing after them may make the situation more dangerous. • Follow the person from a distance to give them personal space. Try to redirect their train of thought in a gentle manner. Some people will respond to verbal redirection, such as pointing out the weather or some other observation of the present moment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>“It sure is gray and cold out today. Would you join me for some hot cocoa?”</i> ○ <i>“Look at those cherry blossoms—how lovely! What is your favorite flower?”</i> • Use positive directions rather than negative. For example, say, <i>“Come with me,”</i> not <i>“Stop, don’t go there.”</i> • Notice what may have triggered this behavior, for instance, a loud noise, a crowded or busy space, a change in routine, or your own emotional state.
IF	THEN
<p>Your loved one seems bored or restless</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage exercise to help reduce anxiety, agitation, and restlessness. Go for a walk, rock in a bench swing, toss a beach ball, dance, or participate in group exercises. • Find moments of connection (try using their favorite music, reassuring touch, reminiscing, storytelling, humor, pets, gardening, or conversation). • Try going outside to experience a change in scenery (get a snack or an ice cream cone, visit a pet store, museum or mall, or take a scenic drive).

Helpful Videos

1. <http://dementia.uclahealth.org/body.cfm?id=69>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gkogN6NKDg>

Additional Resources

1. http://www.thiscaringhome.org/virtual_home/outdoors_wandering_need-to-know.aspx

Technology

There is a lot of interest and hope that technology will provide safeguards against the risk of wandering and getting lost. Most products and services have not been studied to see if they are effective. We try to stay up-to-date on what is available but cannot endorse any of the devices or services below.

- **Smart Phone Applications**

- **Find My iPhone** free feature for iPhones: <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT205362>
- **Life360** is a free application for patients who always carry a smartphone. It uses GPS technology and communicates with other smartphones. <https://www.life360.com/tour/>

- **Motion sensors and voice reminders**

<http://www.thiscaringhome.org/products/motion-sensors2.php>

- **Tracking Devices:**

- **GPS Smartsole** \$300/device, \$35/activation, \$30/monthly monitoring fee. <http://www.gpssmartsole.com/gps-smart-sole.php>
- **S-911 Senior GPS Bracelet** \$185/device and monthly service fee from \$50-200/mo, includes extra features like a panic alert button, in/out of fence alert, shock alert, etc. Up to 30 hours battery life. <http://www.laipac.com/s911-bracelethc.html>
- **Trackimo** \$139.99 with first 12mo subscription included, \$5/mo after that. A compact GPS tracking device that enables you to track anything from anywhere using your Smartphone or computer. 6 days of battery life (standby mode)