

Dementia and wandering

Families and carers of a person with dementia may be faced, at some time, with the problem of what to do if the person begins to wander. Wandering is quite common among people with dementia and can be very worrying for carers who are concerned for the person's safety and wellbeing.

Reasons for wandering

There are a number of reasons why a person might wander. The person's failing memory and declining ability to communicate may make it impossible for them to remember or explain the reason they wandered.

Changed environment

A person with dementia may feel uncertain and disoriented in a new environment, such as a new house or day care centre. Wandering may stop once the person becomes used to the change. The person may also want to escape from a noisy or busy environment.

Loss of memory

Wandering may be due to a loss of short-term memory. A person with dementia may set off to go to the shop or a friend's house, and then forget where they were going and why. They may forget that their partner has told them that they are going out for a while and set off in search of them.

Excess energy

Wandering can be a way of using up excess energy, which may indicate that the person needs more regular exercise.

Searching for the past

As people become more confused, they may wander off in search of someone or something related to their past; this may be a partner or other family member who has died, a lost friend or a house they lived in as a child.

Expressing boredom

As dementia progresses, people find it harder and harder to concentrate for any length of time. Wandering may be their way of keeping occupied.

Confusing night with day

People with dementia may suffer from insomnia or wake in the early hours and become disoriented. They may think it is daytime and decide to go out for a walk. Poor eyesight or hearing loss may mean shadows or night sounds become confusing and distressing.

Continuing a habit

People who have been used to walking long distances may simply wish to continue doing so.

Agitation

Changes that have occurred in the brain may cause a feeling of restlessness and anxiety. Agitation can cause some people to pace up and down, or to wander off with no apparent purpose. They may fail to recognise their own home and insist on leaving.

Discomfort or pain

Walking may ease discomfort, so it is important to find out if there is any physical problem or medical condition and try to deal with it. Tight clothing, excessive heat or needing to find a toilet can all cause problems.

A job to perform

Sometimes people leave the house because they believe they have a job to do or are confused about the time of day or the season. This may be related to a former role, such as going to work in the morning or being home for the children in the afternoon.

Dreams

An inability to differentiate dreams from reality may cause the person to respond to something that they dreamed, thinking that this has happened in real life.

Things you can try

The precautions you take to manage wandering will depend on the personality of the person with dementia, how well they are able to cope, their reasons for wandering, and whether they live in a potentially dangerous environment or one that is relatively safe and secure.

- A physical check-up will help to identify whether illness, pain or discomfort has triggered the wandering.
- Discuss the side effects of medication with the doctor. Try to avoid medication where possible, as it may increase confusion and cause drowsiness and possibly incontinence.
- It is important to make sure that the person carries some form of identification in case they do get lost. An identity bracelet with name, address and telephone number is probably the most sensible. Another option is wearing a medical alert bracelet or pendant, which gives a telephone number. It may also be helpful to attach a nametag to every garment the person wears regularly. In some areas, services are available that electronically record a person's photo and profile for easy access to alert authorities should the person be missing.
- If staying away from home, such as on holidays, ensure that the person carries some form of identification that includes current address and contact numbers. Alzheimer's Australia has Identification Cards available.
- Some people find it helpful to keep a diary, so that they can see if there is a pattern to the wandering behaviour. It may occur at certain times of the day or in response to certain situations, which can then be more carefully controlled.
- Try to reduce the number of objects in sight that may act as a reminder to the person to wander. Handbags, coats, mail for posting or work clothing may encourage a person with dementia to wander.
- Sometimes it is sufficient simply to relocate door locks to positions where the person will not think to look for them.
- Consider installing bells and buzzers that sound when external doors are opened.
- Make part of the garden secure so that it becomes a safe place to walk around.
- It often makes sense to tell neighbours and local shopkeepers about the problem. Most people are very helpful once they understand the situation and may offer to keep a friendly eye on the person with dementia.

Independent Living Centres in each Australian state and territory offer a number of services designed to promote safe living. Information is available on a number of products including monitoring services. Advice is also available on home modifications and home design.

If the person with dementia goes missing

Try to follow these steps if a person goes missing:

- Stay calm.
- Make a thorough search of the house and outbuildings.
- Write down what the person was wearing.
- Notify your neighbours.
- Walk or drive around the block and immediate area, and to any places the person may regularly visit.
- If possible, have someone stay at home in case the person comes home and so that the telephone can be answered.
- Contact your local police. Tell them the person has dementia and of your concern for their safety.
- The police will require details and a description of the person and of the clothes being worn. It is always useful to have a recent colour photo to assist with the description.
- The police may also ask about familiar or favourite places for the person.

When the missing person returns home

- Notify the police immediately.
- Do not scold or show anxiety, no matter how worried or inconvenienced you have been. They may have been confused and frightened themselves.
- Reassure them and get them back into a regular routine as quickly as possible.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Alzheimer's Australia National Dementia Helpline Tel. 1800 100 500
- The Aged Care Information Line Tel. 1800 500 853
- Independent Living Centres in each State and Territory Tel. (03) 9362 6111 or 1300 885 886
- Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service (DBMAS) Tel. 1800 699 799, 24 hours, 7 days – a telephone advisory service for families, carers and respite staff who are concerned about the behaviours of people with dementia

Things to remember

- Wandering is quite common among people with dementia and occurs for a number of reasons.
- This can be very worrying for carers who are concerned for the person's safety and wellbeing.
- There are steps you can take to manage wandering behaviour and ensure the safety of the person with dementia.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Alzheimer's Australia Victoria

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