

# staying safe

steps to take for the person  
with dementia





**Safety is important for everyone, but individuals with dementia and their caregivers need to take particular precautions when it comes to creating a safe environment.**

Alzheimer's causes a number of changes in the brain and body that may affect safety. Depending on the stage of the disease, these can include:

- **Judgment:** forgetting how to use household appliances
- **Sense of time and place:** getting lost on one's own street; being unable to recognize or find familiar areas in the home
- **Behavior:** becoming easily confused, suspicious or fearful
- **Physical ability:** having trouble with balance; using a walker or wheelchair to get around
- **Senses:** experiencing changes in vision, hearing, sensitivity to temperatures or depth perception

Taking measures to ensure safety at all times can help prevent injuries, and it can help people with dementia feel relaxed and less overwhelmed. Evaluate your surroundings for any particular dangers and change them to meet individual needs.

## documents to keep on hand

There are several important documents you should always be able to access in case of an emergency. Keep copies in an easily accessible location at home and take them with you when you are traveling or plan to be away for an extended period of time. Keep a second copy in another location away from home.

- Doctors' names and contact information
- A list of current medications and dosages
- Phone numbers and addresses of the local police and fire departments, hospitals and poison control
- A list of food or drug allergies
- Copies of legal papers (living will, advanced directives, power of attorney, etc.)
- Names and contact information of friends and family members to call in case of an emergency
- Insurance information (policy number, member name)



## safety at home

Depending on the stage of the disease, provided that safety measures are in place, an individual with dementia can live in the comfort of their own home or a caregiver's home.

As the disease progresses, the person's abilities will change, but it's not difficult to adapt the home to support these changes with some creativity, flexibility and problem solving.

### **Evaluate your environment**

A person with dementia may be at risk in certain areas of the home or outdoors. Pay special attention to garages, work rooms, basements and outside areas.

Even the most basic appliance or household object can become dangerous.

### **Beware of dangerous objects and substances**

Even the most basic appliance or household object can become dangerous. Be sure to take precautions that will ensure these items do not become safety hazards.

- Use appliances that have an auto shut-off feature. Keep them away from water sources (e.g., kitchen and bathroom sinks).
- Install a hidden gas valve or circuit breaker on the stove so a person with dementia cannot turn it on. Or, consider removing the knobs from the burners.
- Store grills, lawn mowers, power tools, knives, firearms and cleaning products in a secure place.
- Discard toxic plants and decorative fruits that may be mistaken for real food.
- Remove vitamins, prescription drugs, sugar substitutes and seasonings from the kitchen table and counters. Medications should be kept in a locked area at all times.
- Supervise the use of tobacco and alcohol. Both may have harmful side effects and may interact dangerously with some medications.



### **Avoid injury during daily activities**

Most accidents in the home occur during daily activities such as eating, bathing and using the restroom. Take special precautions at these times.

- Watch the temperature of water and food – it may be difficult to tell the difference between hot and cold.
- Install walk-in showers and grab bars in the shower or tub and at the edge of the vanity to allow for independent, safe movement.
- Add textured stickers to slippery surfaces. Apply adhesives to keep throw rugs and carpeting in place, or remove rugs completely.

### **Adapt to vision limitations**

Dementia sometimes makes it difficult for a person to tell between colors and understand what he or she sees because of changes in vision.

- Changes in levels of light can be disorienting. Create an even level of lighting by adding extra lights in entries, outside landings, areas between rooms, stairways and bathrooms.
- Use night lights in hallways, bedrooms and bathrooms.

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### **Firearm safety**

If you have a firearm in the house there are special precautions you will need to take:

- Keep firearms in a locked cabinet, firearm vault, safe or storage case.
- Lock ammunition in a place separate from firearms.
- Exercise full control and supervision over firearms at all times.
- Operating a firearm demands consistent sound judgment and alert senses. Ask for help from local law enforcement if you are unfamiliar with firearm safety or if you choose to discard the weapon.
- Firearms should be unloaded when not in use.
- Remove the firearm from the living space.



## wandering and getting lost

A person with dementia is at risk for wandering and becoming lost; many do so repeatedly. In fact, more than 60 percent of those with dementia will wander, and if not found within 24 hours, up to half of individuals who wander will suffer serious injury or death.

Be aware of the risk factors for wandering. Consider programs designed to assist in the return of those who wander, such as MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®, or those that to manage a person's location, such as Comfort Zone™.

### Signs of wandering behavior

A person may be at risk for wandering if he or she:

- Comes back 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
- Is restless, paces or makes repetitive movements
- Has a hard time locating familiar places like the bathroom, bedroom or dining room

**Even the most basic appliance or household object can become dangerous.**

- Acts as if doing a hobby or chore, but nothing gets done (moves around pots and dirt without actually planting anything)
- Acts nervous or anxious in crowded areas, such as shopping malls or restaurants

### **Tips to reduce wandering**

If you live with or care for a person with dementia, here are a few tips to help you reduce the risk of wandering.

- Provide opportunities for the person with dementia to engage in structured, meaningful activities throughout the day.
- Make sure the person with dementia gets enough exercise.
- Place deadbolts either high or low on exterior doors.
- Move around and exercise to reduce anxiety, agitation and restlessness.
- Ensure all basic needs are met (toileting, nutrition, thirst).
- Carry out daily activities, such as folding laundry or preparing dinner.
- Reassure the person if he or she feels lost, abandoned or disoriented.
- Control access to car keys (a person with dementia may not just wander by foot).
- Avoid busy places that are confusing and can cause disorientation, such as shopping malls.
- Do not leave someone with dementia unsupervised in new surroundings.



## driving

Driving demands good judgment, quick reaction time and split-second decision-making. Because of the progressive nature of Alzheimer's, a person with the disease will eventually become unable to drive.

It is helpful to have a conversation early on about how the person will maintain independence when he or she can no longer drive. Putting a plan in place to address this before it becomes an issue can help ease the transition.

The following behaviors may be signs that it is time to stop driving.

- Forgetting how to locate familiar places
- Failing to observe traffic signals
- Making slow or poor decisions
- Driving at inappropriate speeds
- Becoming angry and confused while driving
- Hitting curbs
- Using poor lane control
- Making errors at intersections
- Confusing the brake and gas pedals
- Returning from a routine drive later than usual

**It's important to learn about other modes of transportation before it is time to stop driving.**

Losing the independence driving provides can be upsetting and it may be hard to give up the car keys. If the person with dementia insists on driving, caregivers, friends or family members may need to take extra steps, including:

- Encouraging law enforcement to issue a citation
- Asking a doctor to write the person a “do not drive” prescription
- Controlling access to the car keys
- Disabling the car by removing the distributor cap or battery
- Keeping the car out of sight; seeing the car may act as a visual cue to drive
- Having the person tested by the Department of Motor Vehicles

It's important to learn about other modes of transportation before it is time to stop driving. Make plans for transportation, such as rides from family members, friends or community services. Contact the Alzheimer's Association to learn what transportation options are available in your area.



## tips to travel safety

Living with dementia does not mean that it's necessary to stop traveling; it just requires careful planning to ensure safety, comfort and enjoyment for everyone involved. To make sure you have a safe, enjoyable trip, remember to do the following:

- Pack copies of important documents (see list on page 3), medication, travel itinerary, comfortable change of clothes, water, snacks and activities.
- Stick with the familiar. Travel to known destinations that involve as few changes in daily routine as possible.
- If you will be staying in a hotel, inform the staff ahead of time of your specific needs so they can be prepared to assist you.
- Travel during the time of day that is best for the person with dementia.
- Contact the Alzheimer's Association to find the nearest Association office that can provide assistance at your travel destination.

A change in environment can trigger wandering behavior. Enroll in MedicAlert® + Safe Return®, or if you are already enrolled, notify the program of travel plans.

### **Air travel**

Traveling in airports requires plenty of focus and attention. At times, the level of activity can be distracting, overwhelming or difficult to understand. If you are traveling by plane, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Inform the airline and airport medical service department ahead of time of your needs to make sure they can help you.
- Remind airport employees and in-flight crew members of your needs.
- Even if walking is not difficult, consider requesting a wheelchair so that an airport employee is assigned to help you get from place to place.



## disaster preparedness

Disaster situations, such as a hurricane or forest fire, can have a significant impact on everyone's safety, but they can be especially upsetting and confusing for individuals with dementia.

Being prepared in case of an emergency is crucial. Put together an emergency kit in a watertight container, and store it in an easily accessible location.

This kit should include:

- Copies of important documents (see list on page 3)
- Several sets of extra clothing
- Extra medication
- Incontinence products
- Identification items, such as a MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return® ID bracelet and clothing labels
- A recent picture of the person with dementia
- Bottled water
- Favorite items or foods

## Being prepared in case of an emergency is crucial.

If an emergency occurs and you need to evacuate, make sure your plans are compatible with specific needs. For example, if the person with dementia uses a walker or wheelchair, be sure your emergency plan takes this into consideration.

If an individual lives in a residential facility, learn about its disaster and evacuation plans. Find out who is responsible for evacuating the person in the event of an emergency. Notify others if you need to change locations, and keep in touch with them as you move.

Staying safe becomes increasingly important as Alzheimer's progresses. With appropriate planning and accommodation, you can ensure that everyone is as safe as possible.

**We're here all day, every day to help you and your loved ones with your safety needs.**

**Contact us for more safety resources:**

- **Enroll in Medic Alert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®**
- **Order our DVD "Alzheimer's and Safety: A Guide to Planning and Preparation"**
- **Learn from others by calling our 24/7 Helpline or visiting our online message boards**
- **Explore new options available with enhanced technology. Alzheimer's Association Comfort Zone™, powered by Omnilink, is a location management service designed with Alzheimer's in mind. Visit [alz.org/comfortzone](http://alz.org/comfortzone) to learn more.**

**alzheimer's  association®**

**[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)**

**1.800.272.3900**

The Alzheimer's Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer care, support and research. Our mission is to eliminate Alzheimer's disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health.

Prepared under grant number 2008-DD-BX-0628 and re-printed under grant number 2009-SJ-BX-K013 from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice.

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