
Wandering and Getting Lost

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Six in 10 people with dementia will wander. A person with Alzheimer's may not remember his or her name or address, and can become disoriented, even in familiar places. Wandering among people with dementia is dangerous, but there are strategies and services to help prevent it.

- › [Who is at risk?](#)
- › [Tips to prevent wandering](#)
- › [Make a plan](#)



Who is at risk of wandering?

Anyone who has memory problems and is able to walk is at risk for wandering. Even in the early stages of dementia, a person can become disoriented or confused for a period of time. It's important to plan ahead for this type of situation. Be on the lookout for the following warning signs:

- › 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
- › Is restless, paces or makes repetitive movements
- › Has difficulty locating familiar places like the bathroom, bedroom or dining room

Wandering and getting lost is common among people with dementia and can happen during any stage of the disease.

- › Asks the whereabouts of current or past friends and family
- › Acts as if doing a hobby or chore, but nothing gets done (e.g., moves around pots and dirt without actually planting anything)
- › Appears lost in a new or changed environment

We Can Help

The Alzheimer's Association offers programs designed to assist in the monitoring and return of those who wander.

- › [MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®](#) is a nationwide identification program designed to save lives by facilitating the safe return of those who wander.
- › [Comfort Zone®](#) and [Comfort Zone Check-In®](#) allows families to monitor a person with dementia's whereabouts remotely using Web-based location services.

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Tips to prevent wandering

Wandering can happen, even if you are the most diligent of caregivers. Use the following strategies to help lower the chances:

- › **Carry out daily activities.**
Having a routine can provide structure. Learn about [creating a daily plan](#).
- › **Identify the most likely times of day that wandering may occur.**
Plan activities at that time. Activities and exercise can reduce anxiety, agitation and restlessness.
- › **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 communication focused on exploration and validation. Refrain from correcting the person. For example, "We are staying here tonight. We are safe and I'll be with you. We can go home in the morning after a good night's rest."
- › **Ensure all basic needs are met.**
Has the person gone to the bathroom? Is he or she thirsty or hungry?
- › **Avoid busy places that are confusing and can cause disorientation.**
This could be a shopping malls, grocery stores or other busy venues.

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the Alzheimer's Association. [Subscribe now.](#)

› **Place locks out of the line of sight.**

Install either high or low on exterior doors, and consider placing slide bolts at the top or bottom.

› **Camouflage doors and door knobs.**

Camouflage doors by painting them the same color as the walls, or cover them with removable curtains or screens. 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.

› **Keep car keys out of sight.**

A person with dementia may drive off and be at risk of potential harm to themselves or others.

› **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.

Home Safety Checklist

Go to [Alzheimer's Navigator](#) and take the safety survey to receive a free, customized home safety checklist.

Learn more:

[Alzheimer's Navigator](#)

Make a plan

The stress experienced by families and caregivers when a person with dementia wanders and becomes lost is significant. Have a plan in place beforehand, so you know what to do in case of an emergency.

› **Keep a list of people to call on for help.**

Have telephone numbers easily accessible.

› **Ask neighbors, friends and family to call if they see the person alone.**

› **Keep a recent, close-up photo and updated medical information on hand to give to police.**

› **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.**

This could include past jobs, former homes, places of worship or a restaurant.

› **Provide the person with ID jewelry.**

When someone with dementia is missing:

Begin search-and-rescue efforts immediately. Ninety-four percent of people who wander are found within 1.5 miles of where they disappeared.

Enroll the person in [MedicAlert®+ Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®](#).

› **Consider having the person carry or wear an electronic tracking GPS device that helps manage location.**

[Comfort Zone®](#) and [Comfort Zone Check-In®](#) are two options.

› **If the person does wander, search the immediate area for no more than 15 minutes.**

Call "911" and report to the police that a person with Alzheimer's disease — a "vulnerable adult" — is missing. A Missing Report should be filed and the police will begin to search for the individual. In addition, a report should be filed with [MedicAlert+ Alzheimer's Association Safe Return](#) at 1.800.625.3780. First responders are trained to check with MedicAlert+ Alzheimer's Association Safe Return when they locate a missing person with dementia. You do not need to be enrolled in MedicAlert+ Alzheimer's Association Safe Return in order to file a missing report.

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Top Resources



- › [Behaviors \(PDF\)](#)
- › [Helping a Person with Dementia During a Crisis \(PDF\)](#)
- › [MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®](#)
- › [Comfort Zone™](#)
- › [Agitation](#)
- › [Home Safety](#)

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