

STAYING SAFE

STEPS TO TAKE FOR A PERSON LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

MAKE SAFETY A PRIORITY BEFORE IT'S A PROBLEM

Safety is essential for everyone, but the need for a comprehensive safety plan is particularly important for a person living with Alzheimer's or another dementia as the disease progresses.

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.
- Behavior: becoming easily confused, suspicious or fearful.
- Physical ability: having trouble with balance.
- Senses: experiencing changes in vision, hearing, sensitivity to temperature or depth perception.

Taking measures to improve safety can prevent injuries, and help a person living with dementia feel at ease and maintain his or her independence longer.

Visit alz.org/safety for a comprehensive offering of safety information, tips and resources.

SAFETY AT HOME

If safety measures are in place, an individual with Alzheimer's or another dementia can live in the comfort of his or her own home or a caregiver's residence. As the disease progresses, the person's abilities will change. But with some creativity and flexibility, the home can be adapted to support these changes.

Evaluate your environment

A person living with dementia may be more prone to safety hazards in certain areas of the home or outdoors. Monitor garages, work rooms, basements and outside areas, where there are more likely to be tools, chemicals, cleaning supplies and other potentially hazardous items.

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.

- Avoid serving food and beverages that are too hot. The person living with dementia may not remember to check the temperature.
- Install walk-in showers. Add grab bars to 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.
- Monitor the hot water temperature in the shower or bath. Consider installing an automatic thermometer. Ensure that the home's hot water heater is set to no more than 110-120 degrees to prevent accidental burns.

Adapt to vision limitations

Dementia sometimes causes changes in vision that make it difficult for a person to decipher between colors and understand what he or she sees.

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

Beware of dangerous objects and substances

Even the most basic appliance or household object can become dangerous. Consider how you can ensure these items do not become safety hazards.

- Use appliances that have an auto shut-off feature. Keep them away from water sources such as sinks.
- Install a hidden gas valve or circuit breaker on the stove so a person living with dementia cannot turn it on, or remove the knobs.
- Store grills, lawn mowers, power tools, knives 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.

Firearms in the home

In the vast majority of cases, the presence of firearms or other weapons in a household creates no problems for responsible gun owners and others in the home. However, if someone is living with Alzheimer's or another dementia, firearms can pose a significant risk for everyone. Consider the following:

- **Locking or disabling a gun may not be enough.** As the disease progresses, people living with Alzheimer's sometimes misperceive danger and may do whatever seems necessary to protect themselves — even if no true threat exists. This can include breaking into a gun cabinet, finding ammunition and loading a gun. Just because the gun is locked or disabled doesn't mean the person living with dementia is protected from harming themselves or others.
- **Consider removing guns from the home to fully protect the family from an accident.** Family members sometimes attempt to hide their firearms or ammunition to prevent the person living with dementia from accessing them. They may lock the guns in an attic or the trunk of a car, or keep ammunition outside of the home. These are good first steps, but they do not ensure that the person will not find the gun — or appear to be holding a loaded weapon, thereby causing those around the person to react.

Just as legal, financial, care and driving plans are best made early in the disease process, it's important to consider current and future gun safety. Put plans in place for what to do with firearms or other weapons both now and in the future when the person is no longer capable of handling them safely.

WANDERING AND GETTING LOST

Six in 10 people living with dementia will wander and become lost; many do so repeatedly. And it can happen at any stage of the disease. If not found within 24 hours, up to half of wandering individuals will suffer serious injury or death. It's important to be aware of the risk factors.

Signs of wandering behavior

Wandering or confusion about location may be an issue when the person:

- Forgets how to get to familiar places.
- Returns from a regular walk or drive later than usual.
- Talks about fulfilling former obligations, like going to work.
- Tries or wants to “go home,” even when at home.
- Is restless, makes repetitive movements or paces.

-
- Has a hard time locating familiar places like the bathroom, bedroom or dining room.
 - Acts as if doing a hobby or chore, but nothing gets done (e.g., moves around pots and dirt without actually planting anything).
 - Acts nervous or anxious in crowded areas, such as stores or restaurants.

Tips to reduce wandering

- Provide opportunities for the person to engage in structured, meaningful activities throughout the day.
- Make sure the person gets some exercise, which can reduce anxiety, agitation and restlessness.
- Place deadbolts either high or low on exterior doors if you worry about wandering at night.
- Ensure all basic needs are met, including toileting, nutrition and hydration.
- Involve the person in daily activities, such as folding laundry or preparing dinner.
- Reassure the person if he or she feels lost, abandoned or disoriented.
- If the person is still able to drive, consider using a GPS device to help if they get lost.
- If the person is no longer driving, remove access to car keys — a person living with dementia may not just wander by foot. The person may forget that he or she can no longer drive.
- Avoid busy places that are confusing and can cause disorientation, such as shopping malls.
- Do not leave someone living with dementia unsupervised in new surroundings.

DRIVING AND DEMENTIA

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

It's helpful to have a conversation early on about how independence can be maintained when the person can no longer drive. Putting a plan in place can help ease the transition.

Signs that it may be 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.

DEMENTIA AND DRIVING RESOURCES

Visit alz.org/driving for helpful information and resources, including:

- Videos of four different families discussing driving and dementia.
- Tips and strategies for planning ahead and handling resistance.
- Common signs of unsafe driving.
- Resources for alternative methods of transportation.
- Additional information on driving and safety.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Disaster situations, such as a hurricane or fire, or other emergencies can significantly impact everyone's safety, but they can be especially upsetting and confusing for individuals living with dementia. Being prepared for an emergency is crucial.

Prepare an emergency kit that includes:

- » Copies of important documents.
- » A couple sets of extra clothing.
- » Extra medication.
- » Incontinence products, if needed.
- » Identification items, such as a medical ID bracelet.
- » A recent picture of the person living with dementia.
- » Bottled water and nonperishable food items, such as granola bars.
- » A favorite item (e.g., book, picture, purse) of the person living with dementia.

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

If an individual lives in a residential care setting, learn about its disaster and evacuation plans. Find out who is responsible for evacuating the person in the event of an emergency.

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

IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS TO KEEP ON HAND

Keep copies of the following documents in an easily accessible location at home as well as in another secure location away from home.

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

TS-0029 | Updated June 2022