With so many wildfires creating the need for evacuations, the Alzheimer’s Association of Colorado is offering assistance for those first responders who may encounter someone with symptoms of Alzheimer’s, the most common form of dementia.

Because dementia is most common among the elderly, so the person’s approximate age can be a clue; the older the person is, the higher their likelihood for dementia. On the other hand, we have seen diagnosed cases of dementia in people in their 40s and 50s, so you should not rule out dementia just because a person is younger than 65.

• **Facial expression**: A blank or confused facial expression may signal that there is a problem
• **Language Skills**: The person may have trouble finding words or putting a complete sentence together.
• **Attire**: Is the person dressed appropriately for the weather? Do his or her clothes match, or do they look disheveled?
• **Balance/gait**: The person with dementia may have an unbalanced gait or a shuffle. Watch for how he/she ambulates. They may have trouble with balance, tripping on uneven pavement or walking around dark places in carpeting. (appear to them as holes)
• **Actions**: The person appears to be doing something that is unsafe yet they are unaware of their actions (i.e. walking along the side of a busy freeway).

Approaching the person and initiating conversation will offer additional details as to whether or not the person needs assistance.

Crowds and noise can also increase anxiety and agitation so as the evacuation is underway or shelters are being established finding quiet space and identifying another officer or volunteer to stay with the person with dementia may help keep them safe and out of harm’s way.

In disaster situations, people with dementia:
- Are prone to hide or wander
- Are easily agitated
- May forget directions
- Are especially sensitive to trauma

**Response techniques that may help reduce anxiety include:**
- Provide one-to-one instruction regarding where to go and what to do
- Use simple language
- Do not leave the person alone, find someone who can stay with them to offer reassurance
- Move them to a quiet place if possible
- Use distraction to reduce anxiety and agitation
- Be aware of the person’s non verbal communication. Pay attention to cues that the person may be overwhelmed (fidgeting, pacing).
- Reassure the person by holding hands, or putting a hand on their shoulder.
- Find outlets for anxious energy. Take a walk with the person or engage the person in simple tasks.
- Redirect the person’s attention if he or she becomes upset.
- Check that they have their medications.
- Try to make sure they are eating regular meals.
- Avoid elaborate or detailed explanations. Provide information using concrete terms. Follow brief explanations with reassurance.
- Remind the person that he or she is in the right place.

**During an episode of agitation:**
- Approach the person from the front at eye level and use his or her name.
- Use calm, positive statements and a patient, low-pitched voice. Reassure.
- Respond to the emotions being expressed rather than the content of the words. For example, say, “You’re frightened and want to go home. It’s ok. I’m right here with you.”
- Don’t argue with the person or try to correct. Instead, affirm his or her experience, reassure and try to divert attention. For example, “The noise in this shelter is frightening. Let’s see if
we can find a quieter spot. Let’s look at your photo book together.”

Often times a person with dementia will, in their mind, return to an earlier time in their life. This can result in a confusing situation for all parties involved, particularly because the person truly believes that they are right. Don’t argue but reassure the person and assist with getting them to a safe place and/or in contact with a loved one or caregiver. Since the person may not remember where they now live, returning them to safety can be a challenge.

Nearly 70 percent of people with dementia wander. During a disaster situation someone with dementia is confused and anxious, and the probability of wandering increases.

If in fact there is a report of someone with dementia who has wandered, it can quickly become life threatening, so it is necessary to begin a search immediately. If not found within 24 hours, up to 50 percent of people risk serious injury or death.

Wandering is dangerous for a number of reasons: The person may be walking along a busy road; the person may not be wearing weather-appropriate clothing; or the person may wander into an unsafe area (strange neighborhood, off a path into the woods, busy roadways, or back into an active wildfire area). It is also important to note that wandering can take place on foot, in a car or via public transportation. Each of these situations poses unique challenges and threats to the person with dementia and those searching for the individual.

Because of the potential danger to the subject in a wandering incident, it is important to take action as soon as possible.

When a person with dementia wanders, it is considered an emergency. There is no 24-hour waiting period to file a police report or begin a search.

- If not found within 24 hours, up to 50 percent of people risk serious injury or death
- Wandering can happen on foot, in a car or via public transportation.

The Alzheimer’s Association is available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week to answer any questions that you may have about people with Alzheimer’s disease or resources available in the community. Please call us at 800.272.3900 anytime you have a question

We have offices in Colorado Springs, Pueblo, Denver, Ft. Collins, Greeley, Grand Junction and Durango with trained staff and volunteers available to assist. Our Public Information officer is available for assistance in reaching staff at 303-564-9268.