

alzheimer's  association®

staying safe

Steps to take for a person
with Alzheimer's



the compassion to care, the leadership to conquer



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 emergencies
- Insurance information (policy number, member name)



Safety at home

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

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.

Be sure to always have working fire extinguishers, smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors in the house. Test them regularly to make sure they will operate in an emergency.

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

Operating firearms demands consistent sound judgment and alert senses, and it is essential to use great care if you choose to keep them in the house. Make the household safe for everyone by taking special precautions, including:

- Keep firearms in a locked cabinet, safe, firearm vault or storage case.
- Lock ammunition in a place separate from firearms.
- Exercise full control and supervision over firearms at all times.
- Ask for help from local sheriff or police 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, and enroll in Alzheimer's Association safe return program, a nationwide identification program designed to assist in the return of those who wander and become lost.

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

More than 60 percent of those with dementia will wander

- Is restless, paces or makes repetitive movements
- 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 (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.

- 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's often difficult to decide when to stop or limit driving. To help make this decision, get a driving evaluation from a certified professional. Contact the Alzheimer's Association for referrals to organizations in your community that can perform these evaluations.

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:

- Encourage law enforcement to issue a citation.
- Ask a doctor to write the person a “do not drive” prescription.
- Control access to the car keys.
- Disable the car by removing the distributor cap or battery.
- Keep the car out of sight. Seeing the car may act as a visual cue to drive.
- Have 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.

Travel safety

Having dementia does not mean that it's necessary to stop traveling; it just requires careful planning to ensure safety, comfort and enjoyment for everyone.

To make sure you have a safe, enjoyable trip, remember to pack the following:

- Copies of important documents
(see list on page 3)
- Medication
- Travel itinerary
- Comfortable change of clothes
- Water
- Snacks
- Activities

Tips for safe travel

- A change in environment can trigger wandering behavior. Enroll in Alzheimer's Association safe return program or, if you are already enrolled, notify safe return of travel plans.
- 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 learn if there is a local Association office that can provide assistance at your destination.

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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 in the airport.



Disaster preparedness

Disaster situations, such as a hurricane or forest fire, have 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 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 plans take 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.

The Alzheimer's Association is here to help.
Contact us any time, day or night:

www.alz.org

1.800.272.3900

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