

Safety

As people with Alzheimer's or other dementias progress through the disease, their needs and abilities will change, including the ability to stay safe. In the early stage, a person may be able to cook independently but may not always remember to turn off the stove. In the middle and late stages, basic household items and appliances can become hazardous if used without supervision or if security measures are not in place.

At all stages of the disease, families need to keep safety top of mind and regularly reassess the person with dementia's ability and environment. Putting safety measures in place can prevent injuries and help both the person with the disease and the caregiver feel more relaxed and less overwhelmed.

Early stage

Safety considerations for individuals living in the early stage of dementia:

Falls

The person may experience changes in sensitivity to light, contrast between colors and depth perception, which may affect balance and comfort with navigating and increase the risk of falling.

Driving

At some point, everyone with Alzheimer's will no longer be able to drive. Putting a plan in place for when that time comes can be empowering for the person with dementia, as it provides an opportunity to make choices that can help him or her maintain independence for as long as possible.

Wandering

Because of increased confusion and agitation, everyone with Alzheimer's is at risk for wandering and getting lost. Wandering can be very dangerous, particularly if the person lives alone and has no one to monitor the daily changes that may signal increased risk.

Middle and late stages

As the disease progresses, the number of safety risks increases. Consider the following to ensure a safer environment for the person with dementia:

Beware of dangerous objects and substances

Even the most basic appliances or household objects can become dangerous.

- Use appliances with an auto shut-off feature. Keep them away from water sources.
- When it is no longer safe for the person to use the stove, install a hidden gas valve or circuit breaker so the person with dementia cannot turn the stove on. Or consider removing the knobs for the burners and oven.
- 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 could interact dangerously with some medications.
- Make sure any firearms are locked up or removed from the living space.

Avoid injury during daily activities

Most accidents in the home occur during activities like eating, bathing and using the restroom.

- Check the temperature of water and food — it may be difficult to decipher between hot and cold.
- Install walk-in showers and grab bars in the tub or shower to allow for independent, safe movement. Use a shower stool so the person can sit.
- Add textured stickers to slippery surfaces. Apply adhesives to keep throw rugs in place, or remove them completely.

Prevent wandering or getting lost

More than 60 percent of those with dementia will wander or get lost. If not found within 24 hours, up to half of wandering individuals will suffer serious injury or death.

Signs of wandering include:

- Returning from a regular walk or drive later than usual.
- Trying to fulfill former obligations, such as going to work.
- Trying to “go home,” even when at home.
- Acting restless, pacing or making repetitive movements.
- Having difficulty locating familiar places like the bathroom, bedroom or dining room.
- Acting as if doing a hobby or chore, but nothing gets done.
- Acting nervous or anxious in crowded areas, such as shopping malls or restaurants.

Tips to help reduce wandering:

- Engage the person in structured, meaningful activities throughout the day.
- Make sure the person gets enough exercise, which can help reduce anxiety, agitation and restlessness.
- Place deadbolts either high or low on exterior doors.
- Ensure all basic needs are met (e.g., toileting, nutrition, thirst).
- Carry out daily activities, such as folding laundry or preparing dinner.
- Provide reassurance if the person feels lost, abandoned or disoriented.
- Control access to car keys (wandering does not only occur by foot).
- Avoid busy places, like shopping malls, that can be confusing and disorienting.
- Do not leave the person unsupervised in new surroundings.

Resources

Visit the Alzheimer's Association online Safety Center at alz.org/safety to learn more and access safety information, services and resources, such as:

- MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®.
- Alzheimer's Association Comfort Zone®, powered by Omnilink.
- Alzheimer's Association Dementia and Driving Resource Center.

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