

alzheimer's  association®

# STAYING SAFE

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STEPS TO TAKE FOR A PERSON  
WITH DEMENTIA



## MAKE SAFETY A PRIORITY BEFORE IT'S A PROBLEM

Safety is important for everyone, but the need for a comprehensive safety plan is particularly important for a person living with Alzheimer's 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 with dementia feel more relaxed, less overwhelmed and maintain his or her independence longer.

Visit [alz.org/safety](https://www.alz.org/safety) for a comprehensive offering of safety information, tips and resources.



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# 1. SAFETY AT HOME

If safety measures are in place, an individual with dementia can live in the comfort of his or her own home or a caregiver's home. 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 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 where there are more likely to be tools, chemicals, cleaning supplies and other items that may require supervision.

## 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.

- » Try to avoid serving food and beverages that are too hot. The person 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.

## 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. Take precautions to 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 with dementia cannot turn it on. Consider removing 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.



## Firearm safety

Firearms and other weapons can be found in households across the country. In the vast majority of cases, their presence creates no problems for responsible gun owners and others in the household. However, if someone in the home is living with Alzheimer's disease 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 with dementia sometimes misperceive danger and may do whatever seems necessary to protect themselves, even if no threat exists. These actions can include breaking into gun cabinets, finding ammunition and loading guns. Preventing a gun from firing may not prevent the person with the disease or others from being harmed.

### » **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 with dementia from accessing them. They may lock the guns in an attic or in 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 immediately and when the person is no longer capable of handling them safely.

## 2. WANDERING AND GETTING LOST

Six in 10 people 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 shopping malls 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 thirst.
- » 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 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 with dementia unsupervised in new surroundings.

## ALZHEIMER'S ASSOCIATION SAFETY CENTER

Visit [alz.org/safety](https://alz.org/safety) to learn about services like MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®, which assists in the return of those who wander or get lost.

### 3. DRIVING AND ALZHEIMER'S

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 is helpful to have a conversation early on about how independence can be maintained when he or she 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.

The screenshot shows the Alzheimer's and Dementia Caregiver Center website. The header includes the Alzheimer's Association logo and navigation links like 'About Us', 'eNewsletter', 'Message Boards', 'Action Center', 'Advocate', 'Walk to End Alzheimer's', 'Shop', and 'Donate'. The main navigation bar highlights 'Alzheimer's and Dementia Caregiver Center' and provides a '24/7 Helpline: 1.800.272.3900'. Below this, a secondary navigation bar lists categories such as 'Caregiver Home', 'Daily Care', 'Stages & Behaviors', 'Get Support', 'Safety', 'Care Options', and 'Financial & Legal Planning'. The 'Safety' category is selected.

The main content area is titled 'Dementia & Driving Resource Center'. It features a sidebar on the left with 'Top Safety Concerns' including 'Wandering', 'Home Safety', 'Dementia & Driving' (highlighted), and 'Medication Safety'. Below this is a 'Find your local Chapter' section with a zip code input field and a 'GO' button. There is also a 'Get Weekly E-News' section with a sign-up form for first name, last name, and email.

The main content area contains a text block: 'Driving demands quick reaction time and fast decision making — because of this, a person with Alzheimer's will eventually become unable to drive. Dealing with the issue early on can help ease the transition.' To the right of this text is a 'Read more' link with sub-links: 'Having the conversation', 'Planning ahead', 'Signs of unsafe driving', and 'Resources'. Below the text is a video player showing an elderly couple sitting at a table, looking at a document. A play button is visible over the video. To the left of the video is a purple box with the text: 'Watch how four families deal with different issues related to dementia and driving.' Below the video is a caption: 'A Supportive Conversation: Frank has early stage Alzheimer's and the doctor said it's no longer safe for him to drive. His wife doesn't drive, but knows it's time to discuss finding alternative transportation. Full Screen'.

The Dementia and Driving Resource Center is a product of a cooperative agreement between the Alzheimer's Association and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

## VISIT [ALZ.ORG/DRIVING](https://www.alz.org/driving) FOR:

- » Video scenarios showing 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.

## 4. TRAVELING AND ALZHEIMER'S

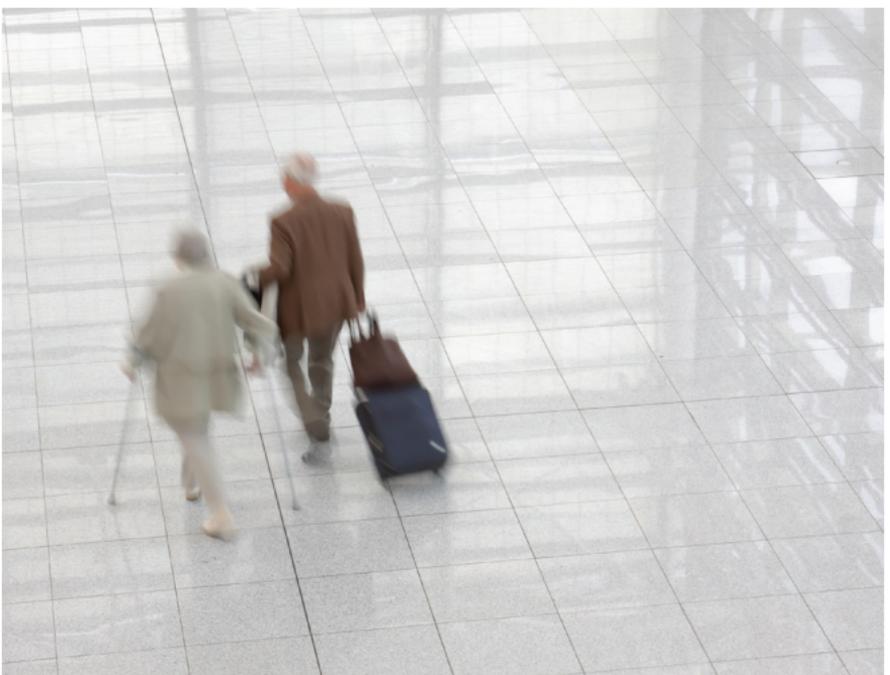
Living with dementia may not mean that it's necessary to stop traveling; it simply requires careful planning. The following may help ensure a safe and enjoyable trip:

- » Pack copies of important documents (see page 11), medication, travel itinerary, water, snacks and activities.
- » It can be helpful to stick with the familiar. If possible, travel to familiar destinations that involve minimal changes to daily routine.
- » A change in environment can trigger wandering behavior. Consider enrolling in MedicAlert + Safe Return. If you are already enrolled, notify the program of travel plans.
- » If staying in a hotel, consider informing the staff about your specific needs ahead of time so they can prepare to assist.
- » Travel during the time of day that is best for the person with dementia.
- » Contact the Alzheimer's Association to find the nearest office that can provide assistance at your travel destination.

## Air travel

Moving through airports requires focus and attention, as the level of activity can be distracting, overwhelming and difficult to understand. Here are a few things to keep in mind for air travel:

- » Avoid flights that require tight connections.
- » Even if walking is not difficult, consider requesting a wheelchair so that an airport employee can help you get from place to place. Most airlines ask for at least 48 hours notice.
- » Contact the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) at least 72 hours prior to travel for information about what to expect during the security screening. While at the airport, remind the person what is involved and consider telling the agent at the security checkpoint that the person has dementia.
- » Do not hesitate to ask for assistance from airport employees and in-flight crew.
- » If the person needs help using the restroom, look for companion care bathrooms so you can more easily assist and will not have to leave the person unattended.
- » Stay with the person at all times.



## 5. EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Disaster situations, such as a hurricane or fire, or other emergency situations can significantly impact everyone's safety, but they can be especially upsetting and confusing for individuals 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.
- » Identification items, such as a MedicAlert + Safe Return ID bracelet.
- » A recent picture of the person with dementia.
- » Bottled water.
- » Favorite items or foods.

If an emergency occurs and you need to evacuate, make sure your plans are compatible with the person with dementia's specific needs. 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 facility, 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.



**alz.org/safety**

The Alzheimer's Association Safety Center offers tips and resources, including:

- » MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®.
- » Dementia and Driving Resource Center.



**alz.org/care**

The Alzheimer's and Dementia Caregiver Center provides reliable information and helpful tools.



**alz.org/findus**

We're in communities across the country.



**800.272.3900**

24/7 Helpline – Available all day, every day.  
(TTY: 866.403.3073)

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The Alzheimer's Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer's care, support and research. Our mission is to eliminate Alzheimer's disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health.

**Our vision is a world without Alzheimer's disease®.**

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