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Safety 101

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While personal safety is important for everyone, the need for a comprehensive safe lifestyle plan is particularly important for a person living with progressive dementia. Unexpected safety concerns arise since dementia causes a number of changes in the brain and body. Compromised judgment, reasoning, physical ability and mobility, as well as the loss of various senses may result in your loved one's forgetting how to use household appliances, getting lost on his own street, falling frequently, or having accidents due to poor sensitivity to temperature or depth perception. Taking measures to improve safety can prevent injuries, help her feel more relaxed, and actually maintain her independent living longer.

First, identify risky and dangerous areas of the home, both inside and outdoors. Interestingly, most home accidents tend to occur in the course of daily activities such as eating, bathing or using the restroom, and climbing stairs, so it is wise to examine the living environment and take precautions.

A few examples:

- avoid serving food and beverages that are too hot (she may not remember to check the temperature);
- add grab bars to the shower or tub and textured non-slip surfaces (to allow safe movement and independence);
- remove throw rugs or clutter (that may become a fall hazard);
- place motion sensing nightlights (for safe wandering at night).

The most basic appliance or household object can become a safety hazard for a person with compromised cognition.



Appliances that have an auto shut-off feature are helpful. It is possible to add a hidden gas valve or circuit breaker on the stove so a person with dementia cannot turn it on. In more advanced stages, care givers have found it easier to remove appliance knobs altogether.

In evaluating the home, pay special attention to garages, work rooms, basements, and outside areas that are more likely to have tools, chemicals, cleaning supplies, or other items that may spell DANGER. Be attentive to the deterioration of skills so as to move lawn mowers, power tools, knives, and cleaning products to a secure place once he can no longer use these safely. Toxic plants and decorative fruits may be mistaken for real food. Remove these items as well as vitamins, prescription drugs, sugar substitutes, and seasonings from accessible areas. It is best practice to keep medications in a locked area at all times.

Dementia sometimes causes changes in vision that make it difficult for your loved one to differentiate between colors and understand what he sees. Changes in brightness of light can be disorienting. Be sure to offer an arm for stability if she is walking outdoors. Indoors, you can address this by adding extra lights in entry ways,

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Home Safety

- Install a shower chair and grab bars.
- Address slippery surfaces.
- Use a faucet cover in the bathtub.
- Reduce water temperature.
- Prevent access to potentially dangerous appliances.
- Remove artificial fruits or vegetables or food-shaped magnets that could be mistaken for real food.
- Lock up breakable or potentially dangerous supplies.

Tools

Safety is important for everyone, but the need for a comprehensive safety plan becomes vital as dementia progresses. Taking measures to improve safety can prevent injuries and help the person with dementia feel more relaxed, less overwhelmed and maintain his or her independence longer.

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outside landings, and areas between rooms, stairways and bathrooms. And, of course, use motion sensing night-lights in hallways, bedrooms, and bathrooms.

While the presence of firearms or other weapons in a household is generally not a problem for a responsible gun owner, if your loved one is living with dementia, firearms pose a significant risk for everyone. You may try to disable the gun or lock it in an attic or in the trunk of a car, or perhaps keep ammunition outside of the home. While these are good first steps, they do not guarantee that your loved one will not find the gun and use it inappropriately. A misperceived danger might drive him to protect himself—perhaps breaking into a gun cabinet, finding ammunition, and loading the gun—even if no threat actually exists.

The best way to prevent an accident is to remove the firearms from the home altogether. A person with dementia is no longer a responsible gun owner.

As progressive dementia develops, there will come a time when it may be necessary to monitor the habits of your loved one. This may require supervision of her use of tobacco or alcohol. Not only do they have harmful side effects, but they could interact dangerously with some medications and dietary needs and create further problems with balance.

Wandering is a major safety concern for your loved one: Six in 10 people with dementia will wander and become lost; many do so repeatedly. If not found within 24 hours, up to half of wandering individuals will suffer serious injury or

death.

Rest assured, it is possible to reduce the risk of wandering:

- Anxiety, agitation, and restlessness can be reduced by getting regular exercise.
- Make sure basic needs are met, such as toileting, nutrition, and thirst that may propel her to wander.
- Place deadbolts either high or low on exterior doors; for night-time wandering, use motion-sensor monitors to alert you of movement.
- Provide activities and mental stimulation, incorporating her into daily activities, such as feeding the dog, raking leaves, folding laundry, or assisting in dinner preparations.
- Provide regular outings with a companion.
- Reassure your loved one when she feels lost, abandoned, or disoriented.
- Invest in a cell phone for him or a tracking device; make sure your loved one is wearing proper identification at all times.

Many people with Alzheimer's continue to live safely at home. Making simple adjustments, taking safety precautions, and having family support can make things easier. Because changes in cognition may reduce his ability to make appropriate decisions about what is safe, there is an increased risk for harm, falls, wandering, and/or malnutrition. Plan ahead for how you will address your loved one's needs: Assess the safety of the living environment and address the potential risks. If safety measures are in place, an individual with dementia can live in the comfort of his/her own home or a caregiver's home. With some creativity and flexibility, home life can be adapted to support safety.

