

WANDERING

Not everyone with dementia wanders away from home or from the place they're supposed to be. However, wandering is quite common and can be one of the most stressful problems for a carer.

Balancing the need to keep a person with dementia safe with the need to preserve their independence, dignity and choice can be difficult. How you resolve this will depend upon the environment in which you live, a person with dementia's personality and how well they, and you are able to cope with their wandering behaviour.

Reasons for wandering

A person with dementia's memory problems and declining ability to communicate can make it impossible for them to remember or explain the reason they wandered. However, there are a number of possibilities.

- **Being in a changed environment** – A person with dementia may feel disoriented in a new environment such as a new home or residential facility. If the person is given help in finding their way around and plenty of reassurance the wandering may lessen.
- **Boredom or loneliness** – Some people with dementia find it harder to concentrate as their dementia progresses. Walking may be a way of keeping occupied.
- **Excess energy** – Constant walking may indicate that a person with dementia has energy to spare, which may mean the person needs more regular exercise.
- **Searching for the past** – As their dementia progresses, a person with dementia may set out to search for someone or something related to their past. This may be a house they used to live in or a partner who has died.
- **Continuing a routine or habit** – People who have been used to regular strolls, tramping or walking long distances may want to continue to do so.

- **Agitation** – Feelings of restlessness and anxiety can occur as a result of changes in the brain. Agitation may cause people to pace or to wander off with no apparent purpose.
- **Confusing night with day** – People with dementia often become confused about the time. They may suffer from insomnia or wake in the early hours of the morning and become disoriented.
- **Dreams** – Some people with dementia find it hard to differentiate dreams from reality and this may cause the person to respond to something that they dreamed, thinking that this has happened in real life.
- **Short-term memory loss** – A person may set off to go to the shop or the house of a family member, and then forget where they were going or why.



What may help people to stop wandering?

There are a number of ways that carers may be able to stop or reduce the frequency that a person with dementia wanders, or if the person does wander, enable them to stay safe.

- Encourage movement and exercise. Do not curb the urge to walk, instead find a way for the person to walk in safety.
- It is a sensible idea to have an identity bracelet or necklace made for a person with dementia. Include on it the person's name and your telephone number so that if the person does wander it is possible for those who find him/her to return them home.
- Some people find it helpful to keep a record or diary so they can see if there is a pattern to the wandering behaviour. It may occur in response to certain situations or at certain times of the day.
- Provide meaningful or physical activities such as gardening, stacking wood and pasting pictures in a scrapbook for grandchildren to keep the person occupied.
- Reduce the number of objects such as handbags, coats and mail for posting which may act as a reminder to the person to wander.
- Consider bells and buzzers which sound when external doors are opened. Or it may be sufficient to simply relocate door locks where the person will not think to look for them or pull curtains over an external door to disguise it.
- Tell neighbours and local shopkeepers about the problem so that they understand the situation and they may then offer to keep a watchful eye on the person.
- There are a number of electronic devices that can alert you when a person wanders away from a designated area. Contact your local Alzheimers organisation for information on these devices.
- Avoid giving medication to prevent the person wandering. Doses which are powerful enough to achieve this will result in drowsiness, increased confusion and possibly incontinence or falls.

If a person with dementia goes missing:

- Try not to panic.
- Make a thorough search of the house, surrounding area and known routes. Notify your neighbours and ask if anyone has seen the missing person.
- If you are unable to find them in the immediate neighbourhood within 15-20 minutes, let the local police know. Provide a recent photo and a description of the person. Offer suggestions as to where the person may have gone, e.g. old neighbourhoods, former workplaces or favourite places.
- Leave someone at home to answer the phone while you search.
- Ask the local taxi company to keep a lookout for the person.
- Often people who are still traffic safe follow the same route when out walking. If you know this route and they are longer than expected it may help lessen the looking time as you will know the time they normally take and the routes they follow.

When the missing person is found:

- Do not fuss.
- Join them – walk with them and gradually move in the direction of home.
- If you are in a car, offer the person a lift.
- Do not scold the person or show them that you are worried. The person may have been frightened and confused themselves.
- Reassure – give a hug or a cuddle. Remain calm.
- Don't forget to notify all possible 'searchers' when the person has been found, including the police.

Your local Alzheimers organisation can provide you with a "Police Advice: Missing Persons" information sheet and profile form for you to use if the person wanders regularly.

Alzheimers New Zealand has a range of information sheets and booklets available for people with dementia, their carers, families and whānau. Alzheimers member organisations located throughout New Zealand provide a variety of services and support to all people affected by dementia. Contact your local organisation on freephone 0800 004 001.

This information sheet provides a general summary only of the subject matter covered and is not a substitute for informed professional advice. Any person with dementia or their carer or family/whānau should seek professional advice about any individual case. Alzheimers New Zealand is not be liable for any error or omission in this publication, as a result of negligence or otherwise. This information sheet was produced in March 2010.

Alzheimers New Zealand – Level 3, Adelphi Finance House, 15 Courtenay Place, PO Box 3643, Wellington 6140
Phone 04 381 2362 **Facsimile** 04 381 2365 **Email** nationaloffice@alzheimers.org.nz **Web** www.alzheimers.org.nz
Charity registration CC21026 **Patron** Lady Hillary **Member** Alzheimer's Disease International