

How to cope with wandering

Experts tell us that almost two-thirds of people with dementia will wander away from home at least once. Even people living in residential settings such as nursing homes or assisted living facilities wander away – even when on secured (locked) units.

People wander for a variety of reasons, including boredom, medication side effects, to look for “something” or someone, or to fulfill a former role such as going to work or looking for their children. They also may be trying to fulfill a physical need—thirst, hunger, a need to use the toilet or exercise. Discovering the triggers for wandering is not always easy, but they can provide insights to dealing with the behavior. Look for the triggers such as fatigue, change, too much stimulus, pain, or even a new illness (e.g. a bladder infection). It is important to remember that medications should never be used to prevent wandering – it just won’t work!

To minimize wandering, try these strategies:

- Make time for regular exercise to minimize restlessness.
- Consider installing new locks that require a key. Position locks high or low on the door as many people with dementia will not think to look beyond eye level. Keep in mind fire and safety concerns for all family members. The lock(s) must be accessible to others and not take more than a few seconds to open in case of a fire.
- Try a “Not an Exit” sign or “Do Not Enter” on the door.
- Place a black mat or paint a black space on your front porch or by the front door as this may appear to be an impassable hole to the person with dementia.
- Add “child-safe” plastic covers to doorknobs.
- Lock windows next to doors.
- Consider installing a home security system or monitoring system designed to keep watch over someone with dementia.
- Use digital devices that can be worn like a watch or clipped on a belt or in a shoe that use GPS to track a person’s whereabouts or locate the person if wandering off.
- Put away essential items such as the confused person’s coat, purse, keys, shoes, or glasses. Some individuals will not go out without certain articles.
- Have the person wear similar or identical clothing every day so you can tell the police what the person is wearing. Make sure you have pictures of the person in that clothing.
- Have your relative wear an ID bracelet and sew ID labels in their clothes. Always have a current photo available should you need to report your loved one missing. Consider leaving a copy on file at the police department and/or registering the person with the Alzheimer’s Association Medic Alert/Safe Return program www.alz.org or 800-272-3900.
- Tell neighbors about your relative’s wandering behavior and make sure they have your phone number.

If your person with dementia is missing, every minute counts! Do NOT assume they are safe. Call “911” immediately before you call your family! Let the professionals and family members do the searching. Caregivers need to remain at home until the person is found or at minimum, have a cell phone if they leave home.

Even if your loved one has never attempted to leave home and wander, it is best to be prepared by implementing one or more of these strategies to help ensure it never happens.