Wandering Behavior: Preparing for and Preventing It

Alzheimer’s Disease causes millions of Americans to lose their ability to recognize familiar places and faces.

Six in 10 people with Alzheimer’s Disease will wander. Many people cannot even remember their name or address. They may become disoriented and lost, even in their own neighborhood. Although common, wandering can be dangerous – even life-threatening.

Here are tips to help caregivers prepare for and prevent wandering behavior.

Wandering: Who is at risk?

Anyone who:

- Returns from a regular walk or drive later than usual
- Tries to fulfill former obligations, such as going to work
- Tries to “go home” even when at home
- Is restless, paces or makes repetitive movements
- Has difficulty locating familiar places like the bathroom, bedroom or dining room
- Checks the whereabouts of familiar people
- Acts as if doing a hobby or chore, but nothing gets done (e.g. moves around pots and dirt without planting anything)
- Feels lost in a new or changed environment

Consider behaviors

- Be aware of who is at risk for wandering.
- Identify the most likely times of day that wandering may occur, and plan activities at that time.
- Provide opportunities for activities and exercise, such as folding towels, listening to music and dancing.
- When night wandering is a problem, make sure the person has restricted fluids two hours before bedtime and has gone to the bathroom just before bed. Limit daytime naps, if possible.
- Monitor reaction to medications. Consult a physician, if necessary.
- Use communication focused on exploration and validation (not correcting) when the individual says that he or she want to leave to go home or to work.
- If wandering is in progress, use distraction to redirect the individual’s focus.
Consider the home environment

- Night-lights: Place throughout the home or facility.
- Affix a stop sign to the interior side of exit doors
- Use black tape or paint to create a two-foot black threshold in front of the food.
- Warning bells: Place above doors.
- Monitoring devices: Try devices that signal you when a door is opened. Place a pressure-sensitive mat at the door or person’s bedside to alert you to movement.
- Noise levels and confusion: Reduce excessive stimulation caused by movement or noise.
- Common areas: Develop indoor and outdoor areas that can be safely explored.
- Clothing: Provide the person with brightly colored clothing.
- Secure trigger items: Some people will not go out without a coat, hat, pocketbook, keys, wallet, etc.
- Avoid leaving a person with dementia alone in a car.

Planning ahead

- Keep a list of people to call when feeling overwhelmed. Have their telephone numbers in one location.
- Ask neighbors, friend and family to call if they see the person alone or dressed inappropriately.
- Keep a recent, close-up photo on hand to give to police.
- Know your neighborhood. Pinpoint dangerous areas near the home, such as bodies of water, open stairwells, dense foliage, tunnels, bus stops and roads with heavy traffic.
- Is the individual right or left-handed? Wandering generally follows the direction of the dominant hand.
- Keep a list of places where the person may wander to, like past jobs, former homes or a church or restaurant.