

Staying Safe: Wandering & the Alzheimer's Patient





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One of the most dangerous behaviors associated with Alzheimer’s disease is wandering. An Alzheimer’s patient who wanders outside alone can easily become lost, confused, injured, and, in harsh weather, even die from exposure. It is imperative, especially in the middle stage of the disease, that caregivers take steps to prevent wandering and know what to do if their loved one is missing.

Part of the job of preventing wandering is to try to identify the reasons why a patient may want to wander. Some common reasons for wandering are:

- **Confusion.** The patient doesn’t realize that he is at home and sets out to “find” his home.
- **Delusions.** The patient may be trying to fulfill a responsibility from the long-ago past, such as going to work or searching for a child.
- **Escape** from a real or perceived threat. A patient can be frightened by noise, a strange visitor, or even the belief that her caregiver is trying to hurt her.
- **Agitation**, a common symptom of Alzheimer’s disease, can also be exacerbated by some medications.
- **Restlessness** brought on by a lack of exercise and other stimulation.
- **Searching** for a person, a place, or a personal item that was lost.

Preventing Wandering

An Alzheimer's patient who is restless or has a tendency to wander should never be left alone. But even with another adult in the house, the caregiver should take certain steps to lessen the danger that the patient will be able to get out of the house alone. Some of these steps include:

- Giving the patient a **safe**, uncluttered **space** to pace in. Eliminate rugs and obstacles that the patient could trip on, and allow him to pace.
- Ensuring all **basic needs** are met (toileting, nutrition, thirst).
- Giving the patient **something repetitive to do**, such as rocking in a rocking chair or glider, sweeping the floor, or folding clothes.
- Adding **deadbolts** to all doors leading to the outside, and keeping the keys in a safe place where the patient can't get to them.
- Installing **safety devices** from your local hardware store on all windows limiting how far they can be opened.
- Installing **bells or alarms** that sound whenever an outside door is opened. These are also available at hardware stores.
- Obtaining a **medical identification bracelet** for the patient with his name, the words "memory loss," and an emergency phone number on it. Make sure the patient wears it at all times. These bracelets are often sold in drug stores.
- If possible, having a **fence** installed around the house that has a locked gate.
- Having your loved one wear a GPS or other **tracking device**, which can help you find him quickly.
- **Notifying your neighbors** that your loved one has a tendency to wander, and asking them to alert you immediately if they see her out alone.
- Searching special catalogs and websites featuring **caregiving products** created for Alzheimer's patients, such as motion detectors, electronic beepers, special latches, and other products. (See the Resources section at the back of this brochure for more information.)
- **Covering doors** with "camouflage" posters that make them look like book shelves or something other than a door. Doors can also be painted the same color as walls, to make them "disappear."

If a Person Is Missing

Even if you've taken all the above precautions, there is still a possibility that, at some time, your loved one will manage to slip away unnoticed. She may have gone on foot or by other modes of transportation. If this happens, there are several things you should be prepared to do to find her as quickly as possible. These include:

Resources

- **Notifying the police.** Call 911 or your community's equivalent. A missing Alzheimer's patient should always be treated as an emergency.
- Having several copies of a recent, close-up **photograph** of the person to give to police, neighbors, and anyone else who might be searching for him.
- **Keeping a list** (several copies) with your loved one's age, sex, height, weight, and other physical features, along with his blood type, health conditions, medications, dental work, dietary needs, and other pertinent information to share with search personnel.
- Providing an unwashed **article of clothing** that has been worn by the patient and kept in a plastic bag to assist police dogs in the search for your loved one. Using plastic gloves to avoid adding your own scent, replace the clothing item every month to keep the scent strong.
- Having a **list of dangerous places** in your neighborhood that should be searched first, such as busy crossroads, bridges, creeks, overpasses, drainage ditches, or steep terrain.
- Providing a **list of places where the person likes to go**, such as a shopping center, place of worship, or park.

Remember that the more people you inform about your loved one's condition and tendency to wander, the more help you can enlist in preventing him from getting lost.

Alzheimer's Disease Research
A program of the American Health Assistance Foundation. Provides information and publications to Alzheimer's caregivers. The website also has a wealth of resources, including how to obtain catalogs of products designed for Alzheimer's patients.
1-800-437-2423
www.ahaf.org/alzheimers

Please Note: The following organizations are not affiliated with the American Health Assistance Foundation (AHAF), and AHAF does not endorse any programs or products offered by these organizations. Some of the organizations may charge fees for their services and advice.

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center
A service of the National Institute on Aging, part of the U.S. federal government's National Institutes of Health.
1-800-438-4380
www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers

The Alzheimer's Store Catalog
Provides products for people with Alzheimer's disease and for those caring for them.
1-800-752-3238
www.alzstore.com

Eldercare Locator
National program that can help you locate a range of services in your area, including respite for caregivers.
1-800-677-1116
www.eldercare.gov

MedicAlert Foundation International
Nonprofit offering Medical ID with paid
24-hour nationwide emergency response
service for individuals with Alzheimer's, or
a related dementia, who wander or have a
medical emergency. The people listed as
contacts are called during an emergency.
1-888-633-4298
www.medicalert.org

National Adult Day Services Association
Provides state-by-state help in finding local
adult day care services.
1-877-745-1440
www.nadsa.org

Alzheimer's Association CareFinder™
Private foundation that helps find good
local care, tackling issues such as planning
ahead, care options, and coordinating
care. Also provides a 24/7 helpline for
Alzheimer's-related emergencies:
1-800-272-3900
TDD: 1-866-403-3073
www.alz.org/carefinder
www.alz.org/living_with_alzheimers_wandering_behaviors.asp

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid
Services (CMS)
Offers a way to compare hospitals, nursing
homes, and home care services on its
website. Extensive caregiver resources.
1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)
www.medicare.gov/caregivers

National Institute on Aging (NIA)
NIA, along with the National Library of
Medicine, offers NIHSeniorHealth, a web-
site specially designed for seniors.
(301) 496-1752
www.nia.nih.gov
www.nihseniorhealth.gov

Housing and Home Modification
University-based nonprofit offers an
extensive library that includes home
modification resources (stair lifts, auto
flushers, grab bars, etc.).
(213) 740-1364
www.homemods.org

National Respite Locator Service
Helps caregivers and professionals locate
respite services in their communities.
(703) 256-2084
www.respitelocator.org

Signs Pointing to Alzheimer's Disease

1. Significant memory loss
2. Major and unsafe behavior changes
3. Apathy and depression
4. Confusion and agitation
5. Failure to recognize common objects
6. Getting lost
7. Difficulties speaking or writing
8. Trouble with routine tasks, walking, balancing
9. Loss of vision and smell
10. Trouble thinking, reasoning

National Resource Center on Supportive





22512 Gateway Center Drive
Clarksburg, MD 20871
(301) 948-3244
1-800-437-2423
info@ahaf.org
www.ahaf.org/ADRresources

Connect and share:



www.ahaf.org/connect

