

Wandering and Alzheimers Disease

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One of the most troubling aspects of Alzheimer's is the person's tendency to wander away from home. There is no way to predict who will wander or when it might happen. During the winter, we especially need to be sure that the person with Alzheimer's is safe. What are some of the reasons that an individual might wander? It can be pain or restlessness, side effects of medication, a noisy or stressful environment, an attempt to meet basic needs (finding the toilet) or trying to meet former obligations for a job or family.

Wandering may also be a natural release for boredom or agitation. If this is the reason, wandering within a safe confined space may be encouraged. When faced with episodes of wandering, try to find their causes.

You cannot always prevent wandering, but you can do many things to reduce the chances it will happen:

- Provide opportunities for exercise. Exercise might include singing, movement to rhythm, walking at an indoor mall or dancing. Develop areas indoors and outdoors where the person can explore and wander independently and safely.
- Reduce noise and confusion, particularly at mealtimes.
- Clearly label bathrooms, living rooms and bedrooms with large letters or pictures. Try attaching a yellow strip of plastic, symbolizing caution, across doors to prevent wanderers from entering or leaving the room. Place a large NO on doors.
- Camouflage doors by painting exit doors the same color as the walls or cover doors with curtains. Place a full-length mirror on doors to the outside. Some people will turn around when they see the image, not recognizing themselves.
- Install electronic alarms or chimes on windows and doors.
- Monitor medication for changes, especially anti-depressants or anti-anxiety drugs.
- Determine whether wandering is related to previous lifestyles. For example, did the person always react to an argument by going out and walking for an hour? Did he always jog in the afternoon?



If you are the authorized caregiver or a family member, you can register the person in your care with the Alzheimer's Association's Safe Return Program. The Alzheimer's Association, in collaboration with Medic Alert Foundation, provides membership plans with 24/7 Wandering Support. Visit www.alz.org/safereturn for details.



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