

*S*teps To
Ensuring Safety:

PREVENTING
WANDERING AND
GETTING LOST



Alzheimer's Association
919 North Michigan Avenue
Suite 1100
Chicago, Illinois 60611-1676
(800) 272-3900
www.alz.org

This brochure was supported by an unrestricted educational grant from Merck & Co., Inc.



ED319Z
©1999 Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Reprinted 2001



Someone to Stand by You

When someone with Alzheimer's disease wanders and becomes lost, it is a frightening experience that puts that person at risk for serious or fatal injury. This brochure offers ways to prevent unsafe wandering and to prepare for an emergency situation.

- ▶ Wandering can be aimless or purposeful roaming that can cause a person to become lost, leave a safe environment, or intrude in inappropriate places.
- ▶ Wandering is one of the most frequent and challenging problems that caregivers face.
- ▶ Nearly six of every ten people with dementia will wander and become lost during the course of the disease, and most will do so repeatedly.
- ▶ Someone with Alzheimer's may not only wander by foot but also by car or other mode of transportation.

UNDERSTANDING WANDERING

Wandering may be triggered when a person with Alzheimer's:

- ▶ *no longer recognizes familiar people, places, and objects*
- ▶ *feels lost in a new or changed environment*
- ▶ *tries to fulfill former obligations, such as going to work or taking care of a child*
- ▶ *takes medications that have side effects such as restlessness and confusion*
- ▶ *tries to relieve stress caused by noise, crowds, or isolation*
- ▶ *experiences confusion at certain times of the day or night*
- ▶ *is restless due to lack of physical activity*
- ▶ *is fearful of unfamiliar sights, sounds, or hallucinations*
- ▶ *searches for something specific such as food, drink, the bathroom, or companionship*
- ▶ *looks for a way out of the home*

PREVENTING WANDERING

It is hard to predict when a person will wander and become lost. However, caregivers can take steps to prevent wandering incidents.

STRUCTURE THE DAY

Establishing a daily routine that includes meaningful activities and sufficient physical exercise can help lessen wandering behavior. Ask the person to help with simple household activities such as sweeping the floor or folding clothes. Also try playing familiar music and dancing or taking walks together outdoors.

MAKE YOUR HOME SAFE

To prevent unsafe exits from the house or backyard, place door and window locks out of sight and reach, either very high or very low. Use a double-bolt door lock, and keep the key handy in case there is an emergency. You may also want to:

- ▶ ***install high-tech devices such as electronic buzzers or bells to signal when a door is opened or place a pressure-sensitive mat at the door or person's bedside that sounds an alarm to alert you to movement***
- ▶ ***put hedges or a fence around your patio or yard and be sure to place locks on any gates***

INFORM YOUR COMMUNITY

TALK TO YOUR NEIGHBORS

Alert your neighbors about the person's condition, and keep a list of their names and telephone numbers. Ask that they call you if they see the person outdoors without supervision. Also inform others such as the doorman in your apartment building or staff in the senior residence or retirement community where your loved one resides.

INVOLVE YOUR LOCAL POLICE

Tell your local police about your loved one's potential for wandering. Advise them that the Alzheimer's Association has a national Safe Return program to help police locate or return someone who is lost from wandering.

SURVEY THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Identify dangerous areas near the home, such as bodies of water, open stairwells, dense foliage, tunnels, bus stops, high balconies, and heavy traffic roads. Check these places first if someone becomes lost.

BE PREPARED FOR A WANDERING INCIDENT

Take steps in advance to prepare yourself in the event that your loved one becomes lost.

GATHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Having reliable and accurate information will help those involved in a search:

- ▶ ***Post the Alzheimer's Association's checklist of what to do when the person in your care becomes lost.***
- ▶ ***Keep a list of the person's age, height, weight, hair color, blood type, eye color, identifying marks, medical condition, medication, dental work, jewelry, allergies, and complexion.***
- ▶ ***Make multiple copies of a recent close-up photograph.***
- ▶ ***Make a list of places the person may go, such as familiar walking routes, former neighborhoods, places of worship, workplaces, or favorite places.***
- ▶ ***Keep scented clothing on hand to give to police. Wearing plastic gloves, store a piece of the person's unwashed clothing in a bag where it will not be disturbed. Replace it monthly to retain the scent.***
- ▶ ***Make a list of possible dangerous areas you have identified in the neighborhood.***

REGISTER IN THE SAFE RETURN PROGRAM

One of the most serious worries for a caregiver is whether the wandering person will return home safely. The Alzheimer's Association Safe Return program is the only nationwide system that helps identify, locate, and return individuals with Alzheimer's and related disorders who wander and become lost.

Safe Return provides:

- A national, 24-hour, toll-free number to contact when someone is lost or found.
- Identification products for the memory-impaired, including a bracelet or necklace, clothing labels, and wallet ID card. These products alert others that the individual is memory-impaired and may need assistance and also list the Safe Return 24-hour crisis number.
- Registration in a national database including important information that can be accessed quickly when someone wanders and gets lost. This information can be critical in helping law enforcement agencies and others in their search.
- Connection to more than 200 community-based Alzheimer's Association chapters across the country that offer assistance and support. Some chapters have scholarship programs to help pay for the registration fee.

To register:

Complete a Safe Return registration form. To obtain a copy, contact your local Alzheimer's Association, call **(800) 272-3900**, or download the form from the Association's Web site at **<http://www.alz.org>**.

Tips to Prevent Wandering

- Check to see if the person is hungry, needs to go to the bathroom, or feels uncomfortable.
- Encourage movement and exercise to reduce anxiety and restlessness.
- Involve the person in daily activities such as folding laundry or preparing a meal.
- Remind the person that you know how to find him and that he's in the right place.
- Reduce noise levels and confusion.
- Reassure the person who may feel lost, abandoned, or disoriented.
- Alert police ahead of time that you care for a person with dementia.
- Make a plan of what to do if the person becomes lost.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following materials are available from your local chapter or the national office of the Alzheimer's Association:

▶ ***Just the Facts and More—Wandering***

▶ ***Steps to Planning Activities: Structuring the Day at Home***

▶ ***Steps to Enhancing Your Home: Modifying the Environment***

▶ ***Steps to Enhancing Communication: Interacting with Persons with Alzheimer's Disease***

▶ ***Services You May Need Fact Sheet***

▶ ***Safe Return Brochure***

▶ ***Alzheimer's Disease: A Guide for Law Enforcement Officials***

**ALZHEIMER'S ASSOCIATION:
SOMEONE TO STAND BY YOU**



The Alzheimer's Association is the largest national voluntary organization dedicated to conquering Alzheimer's disease through research and to providing information and support to people with Alzheimer's disease, their families, and caregivers.

Founded in 1980 by family caregivers, the Alzheimer's Association has a national network of chapters providing programs and services, including support groups, to assist Alzheimer families in their communities. The Association is the leading funding source for Alzheimer's research after the federal government.

Information on Alzheimer's disease, current research, caregiving techniques, and assistance for caregivers is available from the Alzheimer's Association. For more information or to locate the chapter nearest you, call:

(800) 272-3900