



Common Problems Associated with Alzheimer's Disease

Wandering

Wandering describes the pacing up and down, or the tendency to leave home to go for a walk and then be completely unable to find the way back again, which can be a feature of the behaviour of people with dementia. It is important to try to think why the person you are caring for wanders so that you can find a way of managing the situation. Any approach you choose should, as far as possible, preserve the independence and dignity of the person with dementia. Here are some suggestions.

Wandering can be both puzzling and stressful for carers and it is often impossible for the person with dementia to explain why they are doing it. You may need to take into account what you think their reasons for wandering may be and other considerations such as whether they live in a hazardous environment with heavy traffic or in a quiet, relatively safe neighbourhood.

You may decide, as many carers do, that some degree of risk is acceptable to allow the person some freedom. After all, people should be encouraged to remain independent for as long as they can. And it is worth remembering that walking is an extremely good way of keeping fit and can help the person to sleep better at night. The person may also enjoy being out and about or find that being at home for much of the day is too restrictive.

If the person with dementia attends a day centre or goes into respite, residential or nursing care, ask staff about their policy on wandering so that you are clear about the situation beforehand.

Why people wander

Some of the reasons people wander and some ways to cope are listed below.

Feeling lost

If the person has recently moved home or is attending a new day centre, for example, they may wander because they feel uncertain in a new environment. They may therefore, need extra help in finding their way around. This type of wandering may cease once they become used to their new surroundings.

However, as dementia progresses, the person may also lose the ability to recognise a familiar environment. They may need more reminders of where they are or might need to be accompanied if there is a possibility of getting lost.

Loss of memory

Wandering may take place due to loss of short-term memory. The person may sometimes set off to go shopping or visit a friend and then forget where they are going. Or they may forget you have told them you are going out and set off in search of you. It is possible they may become distressed and need reassurance. A note with written instructions as to where they are going or where you are may help in the earlier stages.

Continuing a habit

People who have been used to walking long distances for pleasure or because of their job may simply be continuing a habit. Wherever possible, try to give them the opportunity to continue.

Boredom

Sometimes people wander because they are bored. They may need encouragement to take part in activities that they can still enjoy at home or at a local day centre.

Energy

Wandering may also indicate that the person needs more regular exercise. If you are unwilling for them to go out alone and are unable to accompany them, you might ask a relative or friend to do so. You might also encourage them to exercise with you to music or find them another form of physical activity.

Pain or discomfort

One fairly common reason for wandering is that the person is in some sort of discomfort or pain and they are walking either to ease the problem or in search of a solution. If you think that this may be so, ask the GP to carry out an examination. Sometimes wandering may be a side-effect of medication. If this is a possibility, ask the GP to check.

Response to anxiety

People may wander because they feel very anxious or agitated, or frightened by hallucinations, or because they have always walked when they feel under any kind of stress. Try to encourage them to express their feelings, and offer reassurance.

Searching for their past

As people become more confused, they may wander off searching for someone or something related to their past. Try to give them opportunities to talk about the past and show that you understand their feelings.

A task to perform

People sometimes wander because they believe they have a task to perform. If you can find out what this task is, you may be able to provide an activity that meets this need.

Confusion between night and day

People with dementia may wake in the early hours and think it is day. You may need professional advice if someone wanders at night as it is far more hazardous, particularly if they are still in their night clothes. The person may need to go to bed later or need more activities during the day to use up their energy.

Tips

- Ensure that the person carries some form of identification in case they get lost, such as their name and the phone number of someone who can be contacted if needed.
- Avoid giving the person medication to prevent wandering wherever possible since doses powerful enough to achieve this will also cause drowsiness, increased confusion and possibly incontinence.

- If the person is determined to leave the place, it is usually better not to confront them as they may become very upset. Try accompanying them a little way and then diverting their attention so that you can both return.
- Some carers do lock or bolt doors to prevent the person with dementia from wandering. If you do decide to do this, try to restrict it to only those times which you feel are absolutely necessary. You also need to make sure that any locks or bolts are easy for you to operate in case of fire.
- Sometimes placing a mirror in the hall or other objects such as 'female toilets' or 'male toilets' sign on the inside of the front door may distract the person from wandering.
- You may find it helpful to tell neighbours, the Gardai and local shopkeepers about the situation and you could consider distributing a recent photograph. People may then offer to keep an eye on the person with dementia.
- If the person does disappear, don't panic. But if you are unable to find them in your neighbourhood, contact your local Garda station so they can help you in your search.
- Do not scold the person or show your anxiety when you find them, as they may be confused and frightened themselves. Reassure them and get them back into a familiar routine as soon as possible.

A baby monitor in the bedroom may be a good idea. This is a small device (looks a little like a radio) that plugs into the socket in the person's room and the 'receiving' unit plugs into whatever room you are in. It means that you can hear the person and so will be aware if they start to move about. These can be purchased in any shop stocking nursery equipment (cots, buggies, etc).

Alarm mats can also be helpful to alert you if the person with dementia has got out of bed during the night, even if it is just to allow you to help them find the bathroom.