



Wandering Information Kit

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Understanding Wandering

Note: the term “wandering” is used throughout this handout to refer to a variety of behaviours that may result in people with dementia becoming lost or having their safety at risk.

What is wandering?

- Wandering refers to the need to keep on the move, often seen in people with Alzheimer's disease.
- Wandering behaviour may appear to be aimless or confused but it is often quite focused.
- The person may be trying to get to a particular destination or accomplish a task such as meeting someone or going to work.
- Wandering may occur at any time of the day or night, and may take the person out of the home.
- Wandering outdoors can expose the person to such dangers as traffic or extreme weather conditions.

What causes wandering?

- Wandering is a common behaviour for a person with Alzheimer's disease.
- It is a direct result of physical changes in the brain, leading the person to want to move about, search for someone or something or remove themselves from their current surroundings.
- Wandering, like walking, is not in itself a dangerous activity. But short-term memory loss and the impaired ability to reason or to make sound judgments can contribute to unsafe wandering behaviour.

How can wandering be managed?

- In itself, wandering is not a harmful behaviour.
- When done in a safe environment, it can be a healthy physical and mental outlet for a person with Alzheimer's disease.
- Channeling wandering into a safe activity involves looking at all the potential triggers of the behaviour.
- By determining what may be contributing to the behaviour, it may then be possible to figure out ways to manage it.

Reasons for Wandering

A person with Alzheimer's disease may wander for a variety of reasons. They may:

- be too hot or too cold
- be hungry or in pain
- believe that they need to go to work, catch a bus or get home to feed their children lunch.

As a caregiver, pinpointing the reason behind wandering can be a challenging task, especially when verbal communication has become difficult. Looking at non-verbal clues may help you establish the reason for the wandering.

- Is there a pattern to the behaviour?
- Does the wandering appear aimless or confused?
- Is there a particular purpose to the wandering? Being able to find the pattern of wandering can help you identify why the person wanders.

Once this is determined, you can begin to put strategies in place to manage the behaviour. The following are some of the types of wandering associated with Alzheimer's disease, and some possible reasons for the behaviour.

Aimless wandering:

- non-focused walking with little or no apparent direction, purpose or destination
- it may take place because the person is bored or feels the need to move about
- it may be the person's response to feelings of stress, anxiety or physical discomfort.

Purposeful wandering:

- goal-oriented wandering where the person wishes to accomplish something (such as go to the store for groceries)
- the person may appear to be searching for something or trying to return to familiar surroundings from their past
- they may be looking for a familiar place that will give them feelings of security and reassurance
- they may have a physical need, such as hunger or the need to use the washroom.

Night-time wandering:

- night hours are often a time for wandering
- broken sleep patterns may cause restlessness and disorientation in the middle of the night
- confusion about time may also cause the person to be unaware of the difference between day and night.

Industrious wandering:

- the person may incorporate repetitive behaviour into their wandering
- in their need to keep busy, they may continue habits, or recreate schedules or routines established long ago, such as trying to go to work or catch a bus.

Managing Wandering

The following strategies may help you manage wandering in a person with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia.

Allow safe wandering

- Like walking or other forms of physical movement, wandering is often a coping mechanism for the person with Alzheimer's disease. When able to wander freely in a safe and secure environment, the person with Alzheimer's disease can enjoy a healthy outlet for feelings of anxiety, distress or restlessness.
- A fenced backyard can ensure that the person with Alzheimer's disease is able to wander safely outdoors.
- If there are doors to the outside that you do not want the person to open, place locks where they cannot reach or see them. If they are able to get past the locks, a bell or alarm that signals when the door is opened is a good safety precaution. Consider camouflaging exits and providing distractions at those points (e.g. baskets for rummaging).
- Consider technological devices such as a sound-sensitive monitor placed in the same area as the individual that can help you keep track of their whereabouts within the house.

Look at the immediate environment

- If you notice that wandering happens consistently in reaction to the person's immediate environment, try changing those conditions (e.g., is the area too hot or too cold, noisy, isolated or dark?) This may help to reduce the person's restlessness.

Reduce the triggers

- The environment around the person with Alzheimer's disease will often trigger their wandering behaviour. It may be helpful to remove items that trigger a desire to go outside.
- Hiding car keys or items of clothing associated with outdoors, such as jackets or shoes, may help in discouraging wandering behaviour.
- Consider disguising doors to the outside by covering them or decorating them so that they don't appear to be doors.
- Anticipate events that may suggest to the person that it is time to go out (e.g. darkness falling and 'going home from work').
- Engage the person in activities or conversation to distract them.

Provide visual cues

- Even in familiar places, a person with Alzheimer's disease can become confused or lost. However, familiar objects, furniture and pictures can give the person a sense of comfort and belonging even if they are not always able to articulate where they are.
- Consider placing labels on doors and in rooms so that she can more easily find her way through the house. For example, a picture of a bed may help them locate the bedroom.
- Disorientation at night may be reduced by leaving a light on in the hallway or providing an illuminated clock by the bed.

Develop meaningful activities

- Like everyone, the person with Alzheimer's disease may enjoy participating in activities that are meaningful and where they can feel successful. Consider involving the person in day-to-day activities, such as doing chores or helping with household duties (e.g. peeling potatoes, setting the table, folding laundry or reorganizing a toolbox).
- Consider past skills and interests when presenting activities.
- Be flexible. As the person's abilities change, their interests may also change.
- Try another activity if they show signs of becoming bored or frustrated.

Exercise

- Try to involve the person with Alzheimer's disease in a regular exercise program.
- Walking outside with them can provide stimulation, as can walks in a local mall during inclement weather.
- Regular exercise can use up extra energy, and may help the person sleep better.

Keep records

- A diary or log may be helpful in understanding the wandering behaviour. The All About Me booklet provides a record-keeping tool for storing this information in one place. To download the booklet, visit www.alzheimer.ca/en/Living-with-dementia/I-have-dementia.
- Keep an ongoing record of times of wandering, patterns and cues.
- Make a note of any ideas you have as to why the incident occurred, how long it lasted, and what seemed to help you manage the behaviour.
- Include in your records daily notes regarding the type of clothing the individual is wearing. This information can assist police in the event of a search.

Establish community contact

- Let others in your neighbourhood know about the potential of the person with Alzheimer's disease to wander.
- Ask friends, neighbours, local businesses and Block Parents to stay alert to the possibility, and to call you if they suspect that the individual is disoriented.

Be Prepared

Firstly, it is important to accept that no one thing is going to ensure the safety of the person with Alzheimer's disease or dementia. **Multiple strategies are recommended** and the Alzheimer Society of B.C. is here to assist you with exploring a variety of strategies to help you be prepared in the event that a wandering incident does occur.

Prepare an *Identification Kit* now:

- An Identification Kit is a tool to help you organize vital information on the person you are caring for, such as a physical description and medical conditions.
- To download an Identification Kit, visit alzbc.org/what_is_wandering or contact your local Alzheimer Society of B.C. resource centre.
- Fill in the information and keep in a central location (e.g. on refrigerator door).
- If the person you are caring for goes missing, you will immediately have valuable information in one spot to assist police with their search.
- Check the Identification Kit often to ensure that no changes need to be made. For example, it is important to change the photograph if the person's appearance has changed.
- Be sure to keep two copies of the Identification Kit – one for yourself and one to give police in an emergency.

Ensure the person has identification at all times. Options include:

- **MediAlert® Safely Home® Program:** A national program offered by the Alzheimer Society of Canada and the Canadian MediAlert® Foundation. Members receive an engraved identification (over 100 styles of IDs available including bracelets, necklaces, watches and more), which allows police and emergency responders to quickly identify the person who has wandered and bring the family back together. Call 1-855-581-3794 for more information or visit www.medicalert.ca/safelyhome.
- **Customized ID Bracelet:** Some individuals with dementia wear a personalized ID bracelet with information such as their name and the phone number and address of a caregiver or family member. Generic bracelets can be purchased at some drugstores or jewelry stores and can be engraved by a jeweler. Also consider sewing ID labels into clothing.
- **Locating Devices:** A variety of locating devices, also called personal tracking devices, are now available on the market. Types of devices include GPS, radio frequency, cell phones, and other technologies. These technologies are still new, and the Alzheimer Society does not currently endorse any particular type or brand of locating technology. Contact your local Alzheimer Society of B.C. resource centre or visit alzbc.org/what_is_wandering to obtain the information sheet titled "Locating Devices" which includes a checklist for deciding on a device as well as some ethical issues to consider.

What to do if Wandering Happens

It's not easy to remain calm and think clearly when a person with Alzheimer's disease or dementia is lost. Keep in mind that you are not alone and that others are there to help you. The following are general strategies that may be helpful in the event that a person with Alzheimer's disease or dementia wanders away from home.

Check common areas

- Try and get a sense of how long the person has been gone.
- Look inside the house, including the basement, before expanding your search to the outdoors.
- Check to see if any items such as luggage, car keys or credit cards are missing. These may provide clues to the person's whereabouts.
- If you live in a rural area, do not search on your own. You may endanger yourself and complicate the search for the police.

Contact the police

- **Do not delay!** – when someone with Alzheimer's disease or dementia goes missing, it is an emergency.
- Immediately inform police that the person has Alzheimer's disease (or another dementia).
- Once the police arrive, share with them the information you have assembled in the "Identification Kit" (see previous page for information), including a recent photograph.
- Let the police know about any medical conditions, or medications the person is taking.
- If you know of any areas that they may have wandered to, share these with the police.
- Let them know if the person is registered with the MedicAlert[®] Safely Home[®] program (see previous section titled "Be Prepared").

Mobilize support

- If you will be involved in the search for the person, ensure someone stays at home in case the individual returns.
- At the same time, alert friends and neighbours that the person is missing.
- If the person has used a vehicle, share with police the vehicle information in the "Identification Kit" (licence plate number; car model, make, and colour). If credit cards may be used, talk with the police about informing the credit card companies that a person with Alzheimer's disease is missing and may use the cards. Tracking the use of the credit cards may help in locating the person.

Reuniting After an Episode

A person with Alzheimer's disease who has been found will often be anxious and confused. Using the following communication strategies may help to calm the person and encourage them to return home.

Approach calmly

- Approach the person in a casual manner, making sure that they see you coming.
- If the person does not wish to return home immediately, walk a short distance with them while speaking in a calm, normal tone of voice.

Provide reassurance

- Reassure the person about where they are and why.
- Let the person know that you have been worried about them and will be happy to see them return home.
- Talk to them about familiar things that may trigger a response to return home. An invitation to have a cup of tea or feed the dog may be enough to prompt the person to go home with you.
- The person may be determined to reach a particular location. If possible, consider taking them there right away or at a later date.

Keep your perspective

- The whole experience of someone going missing can be extremely stressful. Remember that the behaviour is a part of Alzheimer's disease. Neither you nor the person is to blame.
- Once the person is safely home again, it is natural to want to ensure that wandering does not happen again. The steps you take to prevent a recurrence should focus on prevention.
- Keep in mind that restraints should never be used as they can have serious effects, such as a higher risk for falls and skin breakdown, and have not been shown to reduce the incidence of wandering.

Ask for help

- For information about wandering, and to download an Identification Kit and Tips for Police, visit alzbc.org/what_is_wandering.
- For information and support, contact your local Alzheimer Society of B.C. Resource Centre, or call the First Link Dementia Helpline at 1-800-936-6033.
- After an emergency situation, some caregivers choose to re-evaluate the person with dementia's living situation. The Alzheimer Society of B.C. is here to help with these decisions.