

Wandering

This Help Sheet looks at the wandering behaviour of some people with dementia. The reasons for wandering are discussed, as well as some suggestions for ways to manage it.

Families and carers of people with dementia may be faced at some time with the problem of what to do if the person begins to wander. Wandering is quite common amongst people with dementia and can be very worrying for those concerned for their safety and well being. The person's failing memory and declining ability to communicate may make it impossible for them to remember or explain the reason they wandered.

Possible reasons for wandering

Changed environment

A person with dementia may feel uncertain and disoriented in a new environment such as a new house or day care centre. Wandering may stop once they become used to the change. The person may also want to escape from a noisy or busy environment.

Loss of memory

Wandering may be due to a loss of short-term memory. A person may set off to go to the shop or a friend's house, and then forget where they were going or why. Or they forget that their partner has told them that they were going out for a while and set off in search of them.

Excess energy

Wandering can be a way of using up excess energy, which may indicate that the person needs more regular exercise.

Searching for the past

As the person becomes more confused, they may wander off in search of someone, or something, relating to their past. This may be a partner who has died, a lost friend or a house they lived in as a child.

Expressing boredom

As dementia progresses people find it harder and harder to concentrate for any length of time. Wandering may be their way of keeping occupied.

Confusing night with day

People with dementia may suffer from insomnia, or wake in the early hours and become disoriented. They may think it is daytime and decide to go for a walk. Poor eyesight or hearing loss may mean shadows or night sounds become confusing and distressing.

Continuing a habit

People who have been used to walking long distances or had a very active work history may simply wish to continue doing so.

Agitation

Agitation can cause some people to pace up and down or to wander off with no apparent purpose. This can be attributed to the changes in the brain that may cause feelings of restlessness and anxiety.

Discomfort or pain

Walking may ease discomfort, so it is important to find out if there is any physical problem or medical condition and try to deal with it. Tight clothing, excessive heat or needing to find a toilet can all cause problems.

A job to perform

Sometimes people leave the house because they believe they have a job to do, or are confused about the time of day, or the season. This may be related to a former role such as going to work in the morning or being home for the children in the afternoon.

Dreams

An inability to differentiate dreams from reality may cause the person to respond to something that they dreamed, thinking that this has happened in real life.

What to try

The precautions you take will depend on the personality of the person with dementia, as well as how well they are able to cope, their reasons for wandering and whether they live in a potentially dangerous or in a safe and secure environment.

- A physical check-up will help identify whether illness, pain or discomfort has triggered the wandering
- Discuss the side effects of medication with the doctor. Try to avoid medication which may increase confusion and cause drowsiness and possibly incontinence
- Consider the psychological causes of wandering. Is the person anxious, depressed or frightened?
- Ensure that the person always carries some form of identification that includes their current address
- DementiaAustralia has Identification Cards available
- Some people find it helpful to keep a record or diary so that they can see if there is a pattern to the wandering behaviour. It may occur at certain times of the day or in response to certain situations which can then be more carefully controlled
- Reduce the number of objects in sight which may act as a reminder to the person to wander. Handbags, coats, mail for posting and work clothing may encourage a person with dementia to wander
- Camouflage exits
- Consider bells and buzzers which sound when external doors are opened
- Provide opportunities for walking as an activity. Make part of the garden secure so that it becomes a safe place to walk around
- It often makes sense to tell neighbours and local shopkeepers about the problem. Most people are very helpful once they understand the situation and may offer to keep a friendly eye on the person
- Ensure the person can see items such as clocks and calendars to help orientate to time and date
- Use visual cues to re-direct wandering (such as a sign saying 'Go Back')

If a person with dementia goes missing

1. Stay calm
2. Make a thorough search of the house and other nearby buildings
3. Write down what the person was wearing
4. Notify your neighbours
5. Walk or drive around the block and immediate area

and to any places the person may regularly visit. If possible, have somebody stay at home in case the person comes home and so that the telephone can be answered

6. Contact your local police. Tell them the person has dementia and of any concerns you have for their safety
7. The police will require details and a description of the person and of the clothes being worn. It is always useful to have a recent colour photo
8. The police may also ask about familiar or favourite places for the person

When the missing person returns home

1. Notify the police immediately
2. Do not scold or show anxiety no matter how worried or inconvenienced you have been. They may have been confused and frightened themselves
3. Provide reassurance and get back into a regular routine as quickly as possible

Who can help?

Discuss with the doctor your concerns about behaviour changes, and their impact on you.

The Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service (DBMAS) is a national telephone advisory service for families, carers and care workers who are concerned about the behaviours of people with dementia. The service provides confidential advice, assessment, intervention, education and specialised support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and can be contacted on **1800 699 799**.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**, or visit our website at dementia.org.au



For language assistance phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**