Walking safely with dementia
This guide offers information, tips and strategies for you if you are living with dementia, and also for your family and carers.

It suggests ways you can walk safely and how we as a community can help if you become lost or disoriented.

Each situation faced by people living with dementia, their families and carers is unique.

It is important to consider your individual circumstances when implementing safe walking strategies.
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Walking is a healthy activity that should be part of your everyday life. There is no need to stop walking even once you have been diagnosed with dementia.

Walking has many psychological and physical benefits. It helps stimulate your senses and encourages connection with other people.

Continuing to walk can help improve your overall quality of life.
Becoming lost while walking

Not every person living with dementia becomes lost or disoriented while out walking. However, you may be at increased risk, whether the walk is part of your daily routine or something unplanned.

“The Alzheimer’s Association (US) estimates that 60 per cent of people with Alzheimer’s disease (the most common form of dementia) will become lost at least once. It is often one of the first symptoms experienced by someone living with dementia.”

Tips for you if you live with dementia

There are many strategies to help you enjoy walking, find your way and be safe outside your home.

Create a ‘circle of support’

- Join a walking group if you would rather walk with other people.
- If walking on your own, leave a note at home in an obvious spot about where you are going and when you plan to return.
- Alternatively, contact someone to tell them where you are going and when you expect to return.
- Consider giving family, friends or neighbours permission to check if you are okay when they see you out on your own.

Use memory aids

- Attach a list of important contact names and numbers, including your own, to your mobile phone.
- Keep a notebook and pen with you to write down memory prompts.
- Try to park your car in the same spot each time, or photograph the location.
- Keep to familiar walking routes and use maps on your phone for directions.

Have familiar routines and places

- Establish a regular routine of activities and places you visit.
- If busy or noisy places are hard to manage, avoid them when possible.
  Go to the shops at quieter times of the day, like first thing in the morning.

Carry identification

- It is important to carry some form of identification, which includes the name and phone number of your nominated contact person.
- You can obtain a Dementia Australia ID card; call the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500.
- Consider an engraved ID bracelet.
- You can make your own personalised kit with important information.
Use technology aids

- Personal tracking devices can provide peace of mind for you and those who support you.
- Many devices and apps connect to your smartphone to show your location.
- You can use other devices to help find your car, keys or personal items.
- Contact the Independent Living Centre in your state or territory for more information about technology aids.

“Walking to the kitchen to get a cup of tea,
Walking to the bathroom,
Walking to the shed,
Walking to the clothesline,
Walking to the shops...”

Taken from Kate Swaffer’s (2014) poem ‘Wandering along the beach’
Tips for carers of a person living with dementia

If you are the carer of a person living with dementia, you can support and encourage them to walk safely. Before using any of these strategies, it is important to discuss them with the person in your care.

Understand the reasons for walking

There are many reasons why people want to walk: to keep fit and healthy, for relaxation or to be outdoors. There are other kinds of reasons people living with dementia may go out walking. These may include boredom, anxiety or anger, or unmet physical needs, like thirst, hunger or illness.

If possible, try to understand the person’s reasons for wanting and needing to walk and try to determine what may have triggered the activity. These important clues may help you to support the person in your care and meet the needs that they could be expressing by walking.

“Some people who are walkers just need to be reminded to sit down and have a cup of tea every now and then, so they can walk safely and not become exhausted.”

Family carer of a person living with dementia
Encourage a daily routine
Regular walking can improve the health and wellbeing of a person living with dementia. A routine and planned daily activities can add structure to each day, providing a sense of purpose and achievement.

- Support safe walking by enjoying walks together or arranging for a friend or family member to go with them.
- Following the same routes may help to reduce the risk of disorientation, as can gentle, unobtrusive redirection.

"Walking sustains my husband’s physical health and mental health.”
Wife of a person living with dementia

Help create a ‘circle of support’
- Encourage the person living with dementia to continue their social activities and hobbies. Help organise regular coffee dates with friends, games of golf or other activities.
- Together, you may decide to give permission for family, friends or neighbours to ask if the person is okay when they are out and about on their own.
- Joining a support group or seeking assistance may be helpful for both you and the person living with dementia.
Walking maintains our social interactions and my partner’s identity.

Family member of a person living with dementia

Focus on home safety and security

- Check the home environment to identify and address potential safety or security issues. This may help reduce the risk of a person living with dementia becoming disoriented in their home, or leaving it and becoming lost.

- The home should be safe and secure, but also support the independence of the person living with dementia. By reducing potential risks, the person can move around freely.

- Keep the environment consistent to minimise confusion and disorientation. A bedside clock that shows AM and PM may help with orientation.

- Security devices or home and personal alarms may be useful, especially at night, as they make a sound when a door or window is opened. Security devices should not compromise the person’s independence.

- If the property has a front or back yard, consider making it safe and secure. The person can then walk freely without the risk of leaving the property and becoming lost.

- A person living with dementia should never be left alone in a locked house without a way to get out. This can seriously compromise their safety and wellbeing. If you need to go out, ask a friend, family member or neighbour to come over for company.
Consider safety away from home

Busy and crowded places can heighten confusion and feelings of disorientation. Avoid them if you can. Visit the shops at quieter times of the day, such as first thing in the morning.

People living with dementia can become disoriented when using public toilets with two available exits, like those in shopping centres. Using an accessible toilet can avoid this issue.

For access to locked toilets, you can apply for a Master Locksmith Access Key (MLAK) with your doctor’s support. For more information about the MLAK go to: Master Locksmiths Access Key (MLAK).

Encourage identification

• Make sure the person living with dementia carries some form of identification, which includes the name and phone number of their nominated contact person.

• You can obtain a Dementia Australia ID card; call the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500.

• Consider an engraved ID bracelet.

“Having safe spaces for walking is all about his wellbeing.”

Partner of a person living with dementia
Use technology aids

With the informed consent of the person living with dementia, you can use personal tracking devices or smartphone apps. These show a person’s location so they can be easily found if they become lost.

Prepare a plan

Consider preparing a plan together with the person living with dementia in case they should become lost.

You could include:

• a list of people who could help look for the person living with dementia and their contact numbers
• a recent photo
• ideas about favourite places they may visit

Make sure all the people on your list know about the plan, and that they may be contacted.

"People with dementia are still “real” people
Living their lives just as they did before acquiring the label of dementia
Walking is good for us and fun
It is not a challenging behaviour."

Taken from Kate Swaffer’s (2014) poem ‘Wandering along the beach’ ©
What to do if a person living with dementia goes missing

Australian studies show that most people living with dementia who become lost are found within 5km of their home and often on the street.²

- Stay calm.
- Make a note of what the person was wearing.
- Thoroughly search the area where the person was last seen, and the surrounding areas.
- Where possible, get someone to stay at home in case the person returns during the search.
- Call friends, family and neighbours. Ask them to thoroughly search their homes and surrounds, such as garages, sheds, parks, bushland and local shops.
- Check locations identified in your pre-prepared plan.
- Understand that people tend to follow the direction of their dominant hand, i.e. left handers will more commonly turn left.
- Call your local police station. Explain that the person has dementia and provide them with a description and other information they need.

What to do when you find the missing person

- Immediately notify everyone involved in the search that the person has been found.
- Remain calm and reassuring and try not to show your own anxiety.
- Try to find out why the person went walking. This may help you understand their reasons for going out. By identifying and addressing any triggers, you may help prevent them from becoming lost again.

² MacAndrew, M., Schnitker, L., Shepherd, N. and E. Beattie (2018) People with dementia getting lost in Australia: Dementia-related missing person reports in the media, Australian Journal on Ageing 5(28) p.3
Tips for members of the community:

**Dementia-Friendly Communities**

The concept of Dementia-Friendly Communities is expanding across the country through a program run by Dementia Australia. Many people have signed up as Dementia Friends. Dementia Friends complete activities to build on their understanding of living with dementia. They learn how to create a positive and supportive dementia-friendly environment.

In a dementia-friendly community, people living with dementia can do many things they did before their diagnosis, such as walking safely in the community.

You can become a Dementia Friend by completing the online awareness-raising activity at dementiafriendly.org
What to do if you meet someone who may be lost

It is important to know how to approach and help someone in your community who may have dementia and has become lost.

Here are some helpful tips

• Approach the person from the front, so you do not startle them.
• Unless they are standing, come down to their level to speak.
• Speak slowly, calmly and clearly, using reassuring body language.
• Say hello, using the person’s name if you know it, introduce yourself and smile.
• Ask, “Are you OK?” or “Is there something I can help you with?”
• Ask one question at a time, seeking a yes or no response.
• Move the person away from traffic, noise and crowds to somewhere quiet where you can sit down.
• Don’t worry if the conversation does not make sense straight away.
• Ask if you can call someone for them. Prompt them for a phone number, which may be in their purse or wallet. They may have a Dementia Australia ID card with them or be wearing an ID bracelet.
• Ask if you can look at their ID and call the number listed on it.
• If you cannot find a contact, call 000.
• If you believe the person is injured, call 000 even if they say they are okay. A person living with dementia can be injured but not able to say so. They can also forget they had an accident or not link the pain they are feeling with an injury.3

Together, we can encourage and support people living with dementia to continue walking safely in our community.

3 These tips have been adapted from: Warner, M. (2006), ‘In Search of the Alzheimer’s Wanderer,’ Ageless Design Inc., USA, pg. 92-93
Further information

Information resources
- Dementia Australia: Resources
- Dementia Australia Help Sheet: Safer Walking for People with Dementia
- Independent Living Centre: Helpful Handbook for Memory Loss
- Dementia Friendly Communities: Register as a Dementia Friend
- Dementia Friendly Communities: Dementia Friendly Groups, Community Map

Important contacts
- Dementia Australia: National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500
- Australian Federal Police: Missing Persons Hotline 1800 000 634
- The Independent Living Centre
- Master Locksmiths Access Key (MLAK)

Dementia Australia
- dementia.org.au
- National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500
- If you are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment call 1800 555 677
- For language assistance call 131 450
This resource is based on discussions, consultations and input from people living with dementia, family members and carers. We would like to acknowledge everyone who contributed to the development of this resource.