

Walking safely with dementia



This booklet features information, tips and strategies on walking safely and what your community can do to help if you become lost or disoriented. Please read and share it with your family, friends and carers.

The information in this booklet has been based on input and discussions with people impacted by dementia. We acknowledge and are grateful for each contributor generously sharing their time, experience and knowledge.

It is important to remember everyone living with dementia is unique. The content in this booklet is general in nature and we recommend you seek professional advice in relation to any specific concerns or issues you may have.

For further information and enquiries please contact:

National Dementia Helpline
1800 100 500

Find us online
dementia.org.au

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Introduction

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. You may just need to make some small changes.

Walking is packed with 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

If you're living with dementia, you may be at increased risk of becoming lost – whether the walk you're on is part of your daily routine or something unplanned.



I am a person.

Sometimes people like to go for walks, even people with dementia.

Sometimes people get lost, even people without dementia. ”

- Taken from Kate Swaffer's (2014) poem
'Wandering along the beach'©

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 dementia¹.

While not every person living with dementia will become lost or disoriented while walking, it's important to be mindful and take measures that can help prevent this happening to you. Dementia Australia has created this guide to give you guidance and support.

¹ Alzheimer's Association (n.d) Wandering. Retrieved March 14, 2019, from: www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/stages-behaviors/wandering

Tips to enjoy walking and activities outside your home

We've created these handy tips to help you continue to 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 or contact someone to tell them where you're going and when you plan to return.
- Consider giving family, friends or neighbours permission to check if you are okay when they see you out on your own.

Carry identification

- Always carry some form of identification, as well as the name and phone number of your nominated contact person.
- Consider an engraved ID bracelet.
- Make your own personalised kit with important information.

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.

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.



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'©

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.

Tips for family, friends and carers

It's normal to feel worried about a friend or family member living with dementia and walking outside alone. However, they need your support and encouragement to continue to enjoy walking and activities outside the home.

Below, we share some strategies that may put you more at ease. Please discuss them with your loved one before putting any of them into action.

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. For people living with dementia, wanting to walk could be due to a number of reasons. This may include boredom, anxiety or anger, or unmet physical needs, like thirst, hunger or illness. When dementia advances, the person may think they need to be somewhere at that time of the day that's connected to their life as a younger person.

If you can, try to understand the person's reasons for wanting and needing to walk and if there may be any underlying triggers. These important clues may help you to support the person in your care and meet the needs that they could be expressing by walking.



Walking sustains my husband's physical health and mental health. ”

- Wife of a person living with dementia

Encourage a daily routine

Regular walking can improve the health and wellbeing of a person living with dementia. By helping them create a routine and planned daily activities, you can help add structure to each day, and provide them with 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.
- Reduce the risk of disorientation by following the same routes and provide gentle, unobtrusive redirection.

“

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

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 social 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 their home for any potential safety issues

- 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. Reducing clutter, using signs and labelling cupboards with the items they contain can help to orient the person with dementia in their own home.
- Keep the environment consistent to minimise confusion and disorientation. For example, a bedside and living room clock that shows AM and PM may help with orientation.

Use tools to help them feel independent and comfortable at home

- 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.

Always put their wellbeing first

- 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

Avoid crowds and disorienting entry/exit ways

- Busy places can heighten confusion. 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 masterlocksmiths.com.au/mlak/

“

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

- Partner of a person living with dementia



Prepare a plan

Consider preparing a plan together with the person living with dementia to help them stay safe when walking. The plan should cover:

- the person with dementia carrying identification, their own contact details and the contact details of their support team with them
- a list of people (family, friends, neighbours) who form this support team and are able to help look for the person with dementia
- details about the person with dementia's earlier life, occupation and pastimes and favourite places they may visit
- providing local police with a photo of the person with dementia and letting them know about their walking routine.

Make sure all the people in your support team 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 five kilometres 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.
- Check locations identified in your pre-prepared plan.
- Call friends, family and neighbours. Ask them to thoroughly search their homes and surrounds, such as garages, sheds, parks, bushland and local shops.
- Consider the person's previous occupation, lifestyle and interests; these may provide insight into where the person has gone.
- Keep in mind 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.

² MacAndrew, M., Schnitker, L., Shepherd, N., & Beattie, E. (2018). People with dementia getting lost in Australia: Dementia-related missing person reports in the media. *Australasian journal on ageing*, 37(3), E97–E103.



What to do when you find the missing person

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

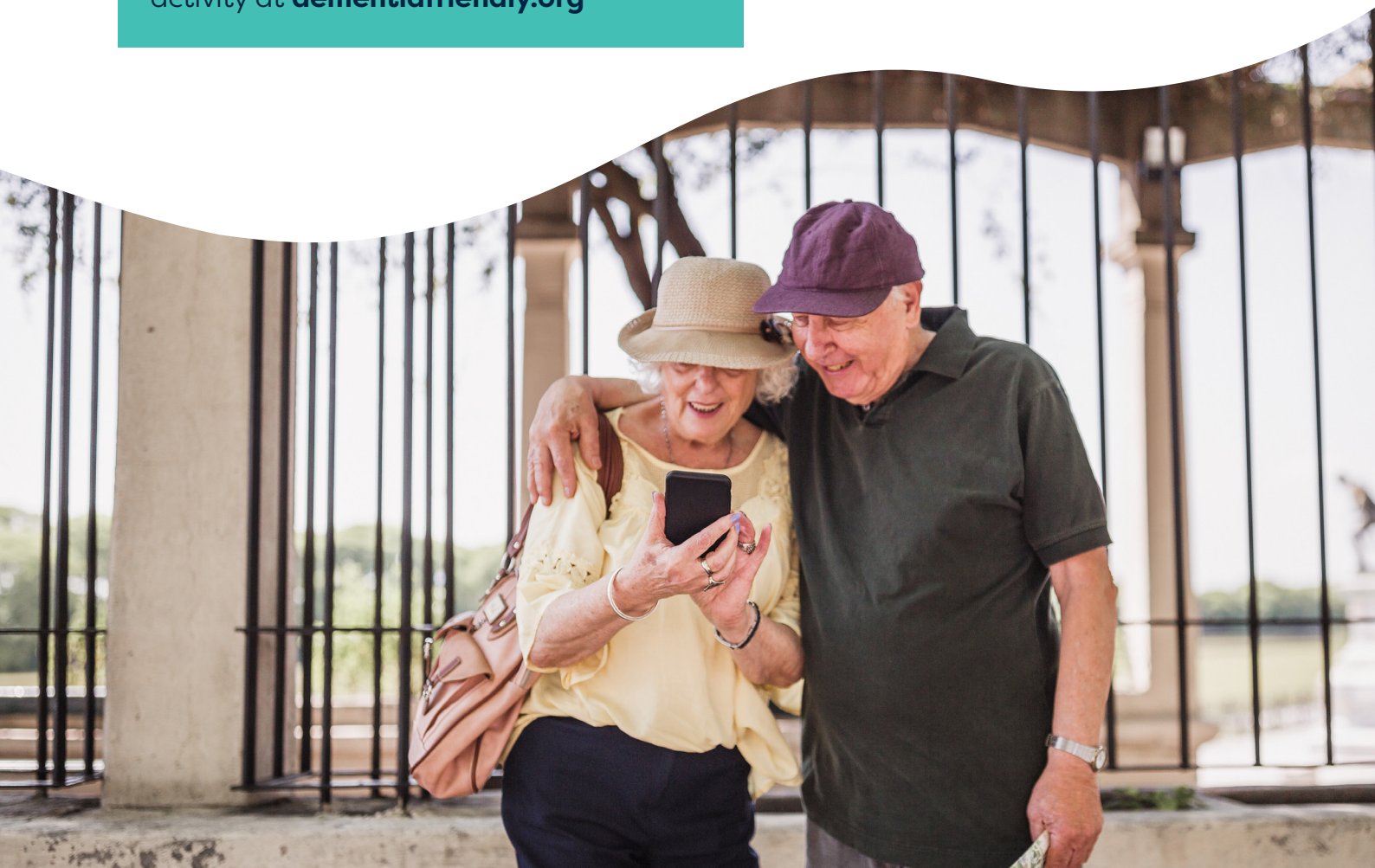
Tips for members of the community

Dementia-Friendly Communities

Even if dementia doesn't directly affect your day-to-day life, there are things we can all do to create a positive and inclusive dementia-friendly community. Our Dementia-Friendly Communities program helps people learn, accept and connect with people living with dementia. You can become a Dementia Friend and complete activities to build on your understanding of dementia and how to create a positive and supportive dementia-friendly environment.

By doing this, you can help people living with dementia 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

If you see someone in your community you suspect has dementia and has become lost, it's important to know how to best approach them. Read our tips for the best way to help them.

- 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 okay?" 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 be carrying or wearing a form of ID.
- 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

With your help, we can work together to encourage and support people living with dementia to walk 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 web page
- **Dementia Australia's 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:** Explore your community

Important contacts

- **Australian Federal Police:** Missing Persons Hotline 1800 000 634
- **The Independent Living Centre**
- **Master Locksmiths Access Key (MLAK)**



About Dementia Australia

Dementia Australia is the source of trusted information, education and services for the estimated half a million Australians living with dementia, and the almost 1.6 million people involved in their care.

We advocate for positive change and support vital research. We are here to support people impacted by dementia, and to enable them to live as well as possible.

No matter how you are impacted by dementia, we are here for you.

Founded by carers more than 35 years ago, today we are the national peak body for people living with dementia, their families and carers. We involve people impacted by dementia and their experiences in our activities and decision-making, to make sure we are representative of the diverse range of dementia experiences. We amplify the voices of people impacted by dementia through advocating and sharing stories to help inform and inspire others.

National Dementia Helpline
1800 100 500



For language assistance
call **131 450**

Find us online
dementia.org.au

