

## Walking About (a.k.a Wandering)

We'll help you to uncover the mysteries behind walking about and give you strategies to keep your loved one safe while as independent as possible.

When a person with dementia walks about in or out of the home it can be very alarming for their loved ones. This action is often referred to as *wandering*. It is a common behavior associated with dementia that can occur at any time of the day or night, and may result in the person being outdoors in bad weather, traffic, or dangerous conditions. Although many people use the term *wandering*, we feel that the term *walking about* is more of an accurate description of the actions of someone with dementia. "*Wandering*" implies that the person's actions are aimless or purposeless, but that is often not the case.

### Walking about is purpose driven.

Although individuals living with dementia do become lost, there is typically a true purpose for walking about. While walking about itself is not a dangerous activity, it can become dangerous when the person living with dementia becomes disoriented or lost, or when there is something in the area that poses risks to their physical well-being.

Everyone should have the opportunity to move about as freely as possible, but changes in the brain caused by dementia may mean that individuals are not able to exercise the judgment and reasoning to do it safely. So, as care partners, we need to balance the person's desires and needs with our wish to keep them safe. The trick is to figure out the cause behind or trigger of the behavior so it can be addressed in a way that is helpful to the person, not restrictive.

### Try to figure out why the person is walking about or leaving.

Why is this behavior happening? Try putting yourself in their shoes...

Behaviors or actions that we observe in people living with dementia are in response to something going on around them that is difficult for them to handle. Since it is problematic for them to communicate feelings or needs verbally, people often react by yelling, withdrawing, hitting, sleeping, or leaving the area.

There are a number of reasons why a person with dementia may walk about. Each of us are unique individuals and therefore experience the symptoms in dementia in many different ways, but there are common causes that may result in someone leaving the home or spending a lot of time moving about the home. You'll need to rely on what you know about the person and their past and present habits to try to figure out a cause.

### Here are some reasons for walking about that may shed some light on the situation:

**Pain.** The person may be in pain and not be able to express the pain.

**Attention.** If someone finds it difficult to concentrate, they may walk about as a way to focus their mind or get away from a distracting situation.

**Temperature.** The person may be too hot or too cold and not know what to do about it.

**Medication.** The person may be experiencing medication side-effects that cause agitation.

**Noise.** The room may be too noisy or overstimulating.

**Boredom.** If the person is bored, he or she may walk as something to do.

**Toilet.** The person may be searching for toilet and is not able to find it.

**Infection.** Frequent trips to the bathroom may be caused by a urinary tract infection, even if the person does not complain about one.

**Lost item.** The person may be searching for something that he or she believes is lost. This item may or may not exist.

**Hunger.** The person may be hungry and not realize that he or she needs to eat.

**Routine.** The habit of preparing a meal for others may result in many trips to the kitchen or the want to leave the house to go shopping.

**Memory.** The person may forget that their care partner told them that they were going out and would be right back and the set off in search of them.

**Exercise.** Walking about can be caused by a lack of exercise and a need to use up excess energy.

**Confusion.** The person may not recognize their own home and may want to go somewhere that is more familiar.

**Sleep disruption.** Restlessness or changing sleep patterns can lead to confusion between night and day. People who suffer from insomnia or wake early the early hours may become disoriented and think it is daytime and time to leave the house or go for a walk.

**Habits.** The person may be continuing a long-standing habit such as going to work, taking long walk with the dog, walking children to school, walking to the market, etc.

**Purpose.** Seeking a sense of fulfillment and purpose by doing something meaningful such as going to work, tending the yard, or participating in a hobby.

## Put a plan into place to meet the person's needs.

Once you have identified the cause or suspected cause of the behavior, you can try some solutions. You may have to try several different things before you find the right fit for the person, especially if it isn't clear what is causing the actions. Don't give up, people don't come with an instruction manual and what works for one person, may not work for another. Try to stick with until you find a solution that works. Please do not try to keep the person seated all day in order to stop the walking about. This may cause anxiety, boredom, incontinence, poor circulation, constipation and overall weakness, thus increasing the risk for falls.

## What you can do!

### Take frequent walks together.

Accompanying the person on a daily walk or enlisting the help of family, friends or volunteers to walk in a safe location such as a park or sidewalk is a simple solution that usually works very well. Build this into the weekly routine. If you live in a cold climate, daily walks can be problematic. If that's the case for you, look for indoor opportunities for regular exercise such as a local YMCA, school or other facilities with an indoor walking track, even a shopping mall that opens for morning walkers. There are many websites that have free exercise videos, if you can't leave the home to exercise try seated yoga classes or programs designed for older adults that are offered online. Since walking about is often caused by excess energy, this is an easy solution to try.

### Talk to your doctor.

Share your experiences with your doctor and describe the walking about and any solutions you have tried in as much detail as possible. Ask the physician to help determine if the person is in pain, has a urinary tract infection, or is experiencing side effects of medications.

### Schedule daily activities that the person enjoys.

Many people walk about out of boredom or because they are looking for something meaningful to do. If the person enjoys a certain type of hobby, try setting up a hobby table in a central location of the house where they can go and work on a project whenever they like. Involve the person in the household chores and meal preparation on a daily basis. Encourage socialization with friends in or out of the home and look for free programs offered through the local senior centers, park service, museum, library or county department on aging. The more the person engages in life, the less likely they will walk about as a result of boredom.

### **Reduce excess stimulation.**

What looks like a bit of clutter on the kitchen counter to one person could be overwhelming to someone with dementia. Try to keep the house neat and tidy. Organize frequently used items in labeled containers so they are easy to locate. Pay attention to when the walking about occurs. It is common for an increase in noise to cause the person to want to get up and leave the area. Activity or noise that used to be easily tolerated or enjoyed such as the TV, radio, grandchildren are running about, or the dogs playing may now be overstimulating and uncomfortable.

### **Put coats, boots, briefcases and other possible triggers away.**

A coat hanging near the door could serve as a signal to someone with dementia that he or she is going out of the house. A briefcase may remind someone about going to work. Look for clues in the person's behavior that they might be responding to these cues or triggers and remove them from one's line of sight.

### **Provide information about the time of day.**

People with dementia often wake throughout the night and become confused about time. They may wake up in the middle of the night and get dressed. Having a large digital clock that shows AM and PM may help with the time confusion. Leaving a light on in the bathroom and the hallway may help reduce disorientation at night. Avoiding day time napping and spending time outdoors will also help encourage normal sleep patterns.

### **Distract the person with something they like.**

Threatening, yelling or becoming angry with the person isn't going to help the situation. They are on a mission, they have a purpose and they think they are doing the right thing. Offering to join them, inviting them to enjoy a cup of coffee or bowl of ice cream with you, or asking them to help you fold the clothes, can all be simple interruptions that redirect the person to something positive. In addition, playing music the person enjoys will often provide a relaxing distraction that will curb unwanted walking about.

### **Never leave a person with dementia in the home unattended with the doors locked.**

This could be very dangerous in the event of a fire, fall, or other accident.

### **Be prepared if the person does leave the home unattended.**

There is no way that we can predict and be prepared for every single event that may happen. It is also not humane to keep someone inside all day long because of the fear they may walk away. If they do leave, here are some tips to help locate the person safely and quickly.

### **Inform others.**

Visit the neighbors, local fire department and nearby shops. Provide them with the name and a picture of your loved one, include your address and phone number. Explain that your loved one has dementia and is at risk for leaving the home and getting lost.

### **Provide identification.**

Purchase an ID bracelet for your loved one with their name and address and important medical information. Sew fabric name and address labels into coats and shirts as an additional form of identification.

### **Use sound alerts.**

Low cost modifications such as attaching bells to doors can either alert the care partner that someone is leaving. There are also security systems that beep or announce an alert such as "kitchen door open" when a door is ajar. Again, please do not restrict the person from going outside. Build time outdoors into the schedule every day, even if it is just a walk around the block or down to the mail box.