



WANDERING

UNDERSTANDING WHY IT OCCURS AND HOW TO PREVENT IT

Wandering is common among people with dementia. They may not remember their address or become disoriented, even in familiar places. The risk of becoming lost can occur in the early stages of dementia, or later on in the disease. If you or someone you know is living with dementia, you may be wondering:

How can I tell if someone is at risk of wandering?

The person may:

- Return from a regular walk or drive later than usual.
- Try to do old activities like going to work.
- Try to “go home,” even when at home.
- Have trouble locating familiar places like the bathroom.
- Not dress for the weather.
- Pace or look confused.
- Repeat the same question within a short period of time.

Why does a person wander?

- **New environments:** Dementia can sometimes make a person feel lost in a new home or respite program.
- **Loss of memory:** They may forget where they were going or why.
- **Searching for the past:** They may be searching for someone, or something.
- **Continuing a habit:** They may be used to walking long distances or having a job to perform. The person may simply wish to continue these activities.
- **Confusing night with day:** Dementia sometimes causes sleep problems. The person may wake in the early hours and confuse the time.

What might be causing the person to wander?

- **Boredom:** People with dementia can find it hard to concentrate on a task. Wandering may be their way of staying occupied.
- **Loneliness:** The person may wish to interact with others. They may wander around the house or neighbourhood looking for interaction.
- **Excess energy:** Wandering can be a sign that the person needs more regular exercise.
- **Agitation:** Things like anxiety and depression can sometimes lead to pacing.
- **Health reasons:** Wandering can be due to pain, discomfort, or side effects of medicine.

How do I figure out the cause?

- Keep a journal. Write down what happened before the person wandered. Were they doing a difficult task?
- Identify the times of day that wandering is likely to happen. Plan activities at that time.
- Use clocks and written reminders about daily events.
- Label doors, drawers, and closets.
- Assess for pain or other unmet needs (like hunger, thirst, or need for the toilet). Book a doctor’s appointment to review medicines.

For more on how to manage behaviours, read the Understanding Behaviour Changes Fact Sheet, located [Here](#).

What do I do if someone with dementia is wandering?

- **If a person with dementia goes missing**, it is an emergency. Call 911. Look for the person in their usual hangouts (e.g., corner store, park).
- **If the person is wandering around home**, use distraction. Provide them with cues to start an activity. Stay calm and reassuring.
- **If night wandering is a problem:**
 - Limit fluids and large meals before bedtime
 - Install night lights throughout the home
 - Avoid day-time naps

Are there safety measures I can use?

- **Camouflage doors.** You can paint doors the same color as the walls or cover them. This can help prevent the person from leaving.
- **Put away triggering items** like handbags, shoes, mail for posting, work clothing, or car keys.
- **Use devices** that alert the caregiver when a door or window is opened. Use GPS tracking devices if the person repeatedly wanders away from home.
 - For more information on devices, see the Assistive Technologies Fact Sheet, located [Here](#).
- **Use identification cards.** These can go inside coat pockets. Make sure it contains the person's address in case they become lost.
- **Let neighbors know** that the person with dementia tends to wander. Ask them to alert you if the person is seen alone and on the move.
- **Reassure the person** if he or she feels lost. If the person wants to “go home,” avoid arguing. Instead focus on the underlying emotion. The person might be bored, anxious, tired, or lonely. You can try:
 - Leaving the house together and coming back.
 - Asking them for help with a task.
 - Reminiscing about the past. Try looking at old photographs help the person feel connected to their memories.

More information and resources:

- How dementia impacts behaviour webinar:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ys55HhyrWZO&list=PLqiA3A3X-xLlqa8QwqUFCxgLTLr1hLG53>
- Short video on how to respond to wandering: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7roMfY24dM>
- More prevention strategies:
<https://www.bayshore.ca/2018/03/13/how-to-prevent-a-loved-one-with-dementia-from-wandering/>
- Speak to a Dementia Care Coach about your unique situation:
<https://dementiahelp.ca/programs-services/dementia-care-coach/>
- Register for a Supporting Dementia workshop to learn more about strategies:
<https://dementiahelp.ca/programs-services/ottawa-programs/>

Ottawa: 613-523-4004 **Renfrew-County:** 1-888-411-2067 | info@dsorc.org | DementiaHelp.ca

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