

Understanding Wandering Behaviour

Being active is an important part of the lifestyle of a person with dementia. Because of changes in the person's ability to remember, they may decide to go out, but when out, they may forget where they are going, how to get there and how to return home. Understanding wandering behavior can assist care providers in recognizing the potential for the person to exit and wander and ways they can decrease the likelihood of the person being unsafe.

Why might people with dementia wander or try to exit?

- **Changed environment** – A person with dementia may feel disoriented in a new home or a personal care home. If the person had lived in the same house for many years, they may wander and search for their old home, the place that is familiar to them. They may want to leave a noisy or busy environment. Wandering may stop once the person has adjusted to their new environment.
- **Loss of memory** – Becoming lost may be due to the loss of short-term memory. The person might go out to shop and forget where they are or why they are there. They might set out to visit a friend and then forget their way to that person's house. Wandering may also occur if a family member tells the person with dementia that they are going out. The person with memory loss may go out in search of their family member.
- **Excess energy** – Wandering can be a way for the person to use up excess energy. This may indicate that the person requires more exercise. If the person with dementia has always been very active, the need to continue being active remains. Going for walks with family or friends may provide the needed exercise.
- **Searching for the past** – As the person experiences more memory loss, they may wander off in search of someone or something related to their past. This may be a partner who has died, a friend or a house they lived in as a child.
- **Expressing boredom** – As dementia progresses, the person may find it more difficult to concentrate for a length of time. People with dementia find it difficult to read the newspaper or watch television; as a result, they can become bored and may express their boredom through movement.
- **Continuing a habit** – People who have been accustomed to walking long distances may wish to continue doing the familiar activity.

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- **Confusing night and day** – People with dementia may experience insomnia, or wake in the early hours disoriented. They may think it is daytime and decide to go for a walk.
- **Restlessness** – Changes that occur in the brain may cause the person with dementia to feel restless and anxious. Anxiety can cause a person to pace. The person may not recognize their own home and insist on leaving.
- **Discomfort or pain** – Walking may ease discomfort. It is important to find out if there is a physical problem or medical condition. Seek medical treatment that could relieve or eliminate the discomfort and ease the person's need to walk.
- **A job to perform** – Sometimes people leave their home because they believe they have a job to do. This may be related to a former role such as going to work each morning or being home for the children in the afternoon.

Things to do that may prevent wandering and exiting behaviours:

- **Keep a record or diary** – Some care providers find it helpful to keep a diary so that they can see if there is a pattern to the wandering behaviour. Wandering may occur at certain times of the day or in response to certain situations.
- **Put away objects that may suggest going for a walk** – Try to reduce the number of visible objects (E.g. handbags, coats, and letters to be mailed and work clothing) that may remind a person of going for a walk.
- **Relocate door locks** – Relocate door locks to positions above or below the person's line of vision.
- **Bells and buzzers** – Consider bells and buzzers which sound when external doors are opened.
- **Provide a safe place to walk** – Make part of the garden secure so that the person with dementia has a safe place to walk.
- **Talk to your neighbors** – Tell neighbors that your family member has dementia. They may offer to keep a friendly eye out for your family member.
- **Register with MedicAlert® Safely Home®** - a nationwide program designed to help identify the person who is lost and assist in a safe return home. Call 1-855-581-3794.

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The Alzheimer Society of Manitoba's mission is to alleviate the individual, family and social consequences of Alzheimer's disease and related disorders while supporting the search for a cure.