

# Walking and dementia

Many people like to take a walk, go to the shops or exercise the dog. People living with dementia are no different. However, due to the impact of cognitive impairment, a person with dementia may become disorientated to the place they are in, forget the route back to their desired location or decide to head to a location other than was first intended.

For people living with dementia, the freedom, autonomy and choice of taking a walk is an important right that maintains their emotional wellbeing.

## Why do people walk?

Like all people, people living with dementia walk for a variety of reasons, including:

- » Continuing a habit: such as going to work or meeting children after school
- » Relieving boredom
- » Lack of physical activity
- » Relieving discomfort or pain
- » Responding to anxiety
- » Restlessness.

## Assess the risk

How likely is it that the person will become lost? Are there any warning signs from previous walks or occasions? Ask the person where they are going before they set off to determine if their intended location is what is expected.

It can be difficult to ascertain the real risk due to the nature of dementia and its effect on the person. If they are having a difficult day one wrong turn or distraction can cause the person to leave a normal route and become disorientated.

## Useful tips to reduce the risk of a person getting lost

- » Ensure the person has identification and an emergency call number on them - i.e. an ID bracelet or card in a wallet
- » Consider a GPS device but be aware of their limitations - in particular how often they need to be charged and if they will work outside of mobile range
- » Make a note of what the person is wearing and if they are carrying anything when they leave
- » If they carry one, ensure they have a mobile phone on them that is charged and switched on
- » Take note of how long is a normal time for the person to be out walking and set an alarm to alert you if the person is gone longer than normal
- » If the person is going to the bathroom in a shopping centre, ensure you wait for them in line of sight of the exit
- » Consider accompanied walks as an alternative, either with friends, family or a community care service provider.

### Assistive equipment

There are a number of assistive technology devices available to help people living with dementia maintain their independence. Be sure to involve the person with dementia in any decisions to implement assistive technology if possible. A GPS device is no use if the person with dementia does not want to wear it.

- » GPS and monitoring devices:
  - » Try to get used to wearing a watch with GPS capability early in the dementia journey
  - » A waterproof watch will allow it to be worn all the time
  - » It is imperative to learn how a GPS device works prior to using it
  - » Also be aware that some GPS devices use mobile towers to work so do not work outside of mobile reception areas.
- » Emergency Identification and Medic-Alert pendants and bracelets
- » Door sensors and wireless door monitors
- » Exit reminders
- » Motion detectors.

For more information please see our [Assistive Technology](#) webpage.

### What to do if the person becomes lost






If the person has been gone longer than normal, or is not where you expect them to be:

- » Carry out an immediate search of the area. If in a shopping centre alert the customer information desk straight away
- » Alert the police if an immediate search fails to find the person. Do not be afraid to alert them quickly. The longer a person is missing the larger a police search area becomes
- » Ensure you have the person's details ready when reporting to the police including what they are wearing, their height and weight, their eye and hair colour, any health conditions and any distinguishing features, such as wearing glasses. A recent photo is also very helpful
- » Have details handy such as previous home addresses and favourite places to visit
- » Get support for yourself. When a person goes missing it can be a very stressful time for everyone involved.

For more information please contact us on [1300 66 77 88](tel:1300667788) or email [support@alzheimerswa.org.au](mailto:support@alzheimerswa.org.au).

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