

Walking about or 'wandering'

There are many reasons why some people with dementia feel compelled to walk about or leave their home. It is important to think about why the person might be doing this so that you can find ways to deal with the situation. Any approach you choose should, as far as possible, preserve the person's independence and dignity. Here are some suggestions.

Carers can feel concerned and puzzled if the person they are caring for starts to walk about in an apparently aimless way.

The steps you take will depend on how well the person is able to cope and the possible reasons for this behaviour. You will also need to take the safety of the person's environment into account.

There is no such thing as a risk-free environment but obviously some places are safer than others. It is very important that people are encouraged to remain independent for as long as they can. You may therefore decide, as many carers do, that some degree of risk is acceptable in order to maintain the person's quality of life.

Why do people behave in this way?

It is worth reminding ourselves why we might go for a walk.

- It helps us to keep fit and to sleep better at night.
- It is a good way to relieve tension.
- Some of us walk for pure enjoyment. For many people, walking is a lifelong habit.

These reasons apply equally to people with dementia.

If the person you are caring for goes into day care, respite residential care or long-term care, it is important to tell the staff about their walking habits and to find out what the policy of the home is, so that you are clear about the situation beforehand.



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Reasons for walking

Feeling Lost



If the person has recently moved home, is attending a new day care or is in residential respite care, they may feel uncertain in a new environment and may need extra help in finding their way about.

They may also be more confused about the geography of their own home when they return. This disorientation should disappear once they become familiar with their new surroundings. However, as the dementia progresses, people may fail to recognize familiar surroundings – they may even feel that their own home is a strange place.

Loss of memory

Short-term memory loss may lead to this type of behaviour. A person will embark on a journey for a specific purpose and with a specific goal in mind. They may then forget where they were going and why.

They may forget that you have told them that you are going out and they will set out to look for you.

This may lead to extreme anxiety and they will need plenty of reassurance. In the earlier stages, notes reminding the person where you have gone and when you will be back may be of help. It is important to put the notes – securely fastened – in a place where the person is likely to see them such as near the kettle or the telephone.

As the condition progresses, such strategies will probably not be effective.

Continuing a habit

People who have been lifelong walkers, for whatever reason, will naturally wish to continue. Try to make this possible for as long as you can.

You may be able to enlist the help of relatives or friends to accompany the person if you are unable to do this yourself.

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Boredom

People may walk about a lot because they are bored. Many people with dementia just do not have enough to do. Being occupied brings with it a sense of purpose and self-worth for everyone and people with dementia are no exception.

Energy

Constant walking may also indicate that the person with dementia has energy to spare and feels the need for more regular exercise.

Pain and discomfort

We often walk when we are in pain, attempting to ease our discomfort. In the case of arthritic or rheumatic pain it may actually help. Alternatively, people may be trying to escape from the pain. Ask the GP to examine the person if this might be the case. Walking can also be a side effect of certain drugs. Again, you should ask your GP to check.

Response to anxiety

People may walk about a lot if they are very agitated or anxious. They may also be responding to hallucinations, which are a common symptom of some types of dementia (see advice sheet, *Hallucinations and delusions*). Try to encourage the person to tell you about their anxieties and offer reassurance.

Searching for the past

As the dementia progresses, people may set out to search for someone or something related to their past. Encourage them to talk about this and demonstrate that you take their feelings seriously.

A task to perform

The person with dementia may walk because they feel they must perform a certain task. This may be a task which they have done in the past related to a former occupation. It may be possible to find an activity which fulfils this sense of purpose.

“Walking can also be a side effect of certain drugs.”

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Confusion about time

It is common for a person with dementia to become confused about the time. They may wake in the middle of the night and get ready for the next day. The reason for this confusion is easy to understand, especially in the winter when people go to bed in the dark and get up in the dark. Try to provide more daytime activities which use up energy or perhaps persuade the person to go to bed later. If their body clock is seriously out of step, you may need to seek professional help.

Tips

If the person does disappear, don't panic, stay calm.

- Ensure that the person carries some form of identification – for example, name and phone number of a person who can be contacted – in case they get lost. This could be sewn into a jacket or a handbag so that it is not easily removed.
- Keep a recent photograph so that people can easily identify the person.
- Observe the most likely time of day that wandering or pacing happens and plan activities around “pacing time”.
- If the person is determined to leave, it is better not to confront them as this may lead to you both becoming upset. Keep calm, accompany them a little way and then divert their attention so that you both return.
- The short-term memory loss will actually help you in these situations because, provided neither of you has become distressed; the person will soon forget the incident.
- Avoid giving medication to prevent the person walking away. Doses powerful enough to achieve this will cause drowsiness, increase confusion and possibly cause falls and incontinence.
- Limit day-time naps if possible.
- Some family carers lock or bolt doors to prevent the person from leaving the house. If you decide that there is no other alternative, try to limit the occasions as much as possible. You must be aware of the risk of fire and ensure that any locks or bolts are easy for you to operate.
- Restrict fluids 2-3 hours before bedtime.
- Some carers have found that placing a mirror in the hall or fixing a bead curtain across the front door will deter the person from leaving.
- However, some people with dementia find these measures distressing.
- You may find it helpful to tell local shopkeepers and neighbours that the person suffers from dementia. Give them your contact number so that they can call you if necessary.
- If you are unable to find them by yourself or with help, tell the local police.

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- When the person returns, try not to scold them or show them or you're your anxiety. Reassure them and get them back into a familiar routine as soon as possible.
- Once the situation is resolved do your best to relax. Phone a family member or friend if you can talk about your feelings.
- Remember that this type of behaviour does not last. It seems to be a phase or condition which people go through. It is up to you whether an incident is a minor worry or a major trauma. Most people with dementia retain their road sense and very rarely seem to be involved in traffic accidents.

Raise your guard when :

- The person returns from a routine regular walk later than usual.
- Talks about fulfilling past obligations e.g. going to work.
- Tries to "go home" even when at home.
- Restless pacing increases.
- Cannot find familiar places.
- Feels lost in a new environment and gets anxious.

Tips to modify the home environment :

- Place night lights strategically
- Place locks strategically but out of line of sight
- "Camouflage" doors e.g. same colour as walls.
- Warning bell at top of door
- Safety gates / fences /hedges

The Alzheimer's Society UK would like to thank Dr Rupert McShane, Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford, for help in preparing this advice sheet.

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