

Supporting carers and families of people with dementia who wander

Who is a missing person and why is it an issue for people with dementia?

A missing person is defined as someone where there are concerns for their current safety and wellbeing. The majority of missing people are found safe and well. However, people can become vulnerable whilst they are away from their supports and the anxiety and fear for those who search can have long lasting impacts.

'Wandering' is the term used for those people with dementia who may wander from their usual environments. Wandering is quite common amongst people with dementia and can be very worrying for families and carers concerned for their safety and well being. The person's failing memory and declining ability to communicate may make it impossible for them to remember or explain the reason why they wandered.

There are many reasons why someone with dementia may wander. These include:

- changed environment
- confusion
- excess energy
- searching for the past
- expressing boredom
- confusing night with day
- continuing a habit
- agitation, discomfort or pain
- a job to perform.

A person with dementia may feel uncertain and disorientated in a new environment such as a new house or day centre. It could happen because a person may forget where they were going or why. Wandering can be a way of using up excess energy which might indicate the person needs more regular exercise. People with dementia may become confused and wander off in search of someone or something, relating to their past.

As dementia progresses people find it harder to concentrate for any length of time and wandering may be their way of keeping occupied. People who have been used to walking long distances may simply wish to continue doing so. Agitation, discomfort, any physical pain, tight clothing, excessive heat or needing to find a toilet can all be causes for wandering. Sometimes people leave the house because they believe they have to go to work or pick up their children in the afternoon.

What are the challenges for those who are missing?

There are many challenges the missing person may face such as safety, vulnerabilities, no access to medication, exposure to the elements, loss of orientation around current time, and inability to communicate as to where they are supposed to be. It is important to note that a person with dementia will have their short-term memory affected and may be very confused and scared. They might have difficulty remembering their name, address or phone number. Example through rituals such as celebrating their birthday or visiting a place special to them.

Be careful of using drugs or alcohol to alleviate pain. Research has shown that many drugs and alcohol can worsen mood and problem solving abilities.

What are the challenges for those left behind?

Those left behind may face anxiety, fear and confusion about where to search and how to look for their loved one. It is important to stay calm.

Initially a person should make a thorough search of the house, garage and shed. Write down what the person was wearing and perhaps notify the neighbours. It might be a good idea to walk or drive around the block and immediate area and to any places the person may regularly visit. If possible,

have somebody stay at home in case the person comes home and so that the telephone can be answered.

If you still cannot locate the person, you need to visit your the local police station to lodge a missing persons report. The police may ask for a recent colour photograph and any identifying characteristics about the person who has wandered.

If the person remains missing for an extended period of time, then accessing emotional support may assist you in surviving the trauma of not knowing.

When the person returns home

When the person returns home, you must notify the police immediately.

Do not scold or show anxiety, no matter how worried or inconvenienced you have been, as they may have been confused and frightened themselves. Provide reassurance and get back into a regular routine as quickly as possible.

What to try for the future

The precautions you take will depend on the personality of the person with dementia, as well as how well they are able to cope, their reason for wandering and whether they live in a potentially dangerous or safe and secure environment. It is important to identify whether illness, pain or discomfort has triggered the wandering episode. Try to avoid medication which may increase confusion and cause drowsiness. Try to reduce the objects in sight which may remind the person to wander such as handbags, coats and work clothing.

Contact details

For further information about this material or other topics, please call us on:

Phone (02) 8688 8173 or 1800 227 772 • **National Relay Service** 1800 555 677

Fax (02) 8688 9632 • **Facebook** www.facebook.com/missing.501 • **Email** ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au

It is important to ensure that the person carries some form of identification in case they do get lost. Alzheimer's Australia has Identification Cards available. It often makes sense to tell neighbours and local shopkeepers about the problem. Most people are very helpful once they understand the situation and may offer to keep a friendly eye on the person.

To provide protection for the person who may wander again in the future and to minimise stress on impact on carers and families, you can register with the *Safely Home Program*, which is a joint initiative of Alzheimer's Australia NSW and the NSW Police Force. This program provides rapid and accurate identification of a person who has wandered.

Where to go for help

If a person is missing, visit the local police in the first instance and complete a missing person's report. You can also liaise with NSW Police Force Missing Persons Unit on:

▲ **Phone:** 1800 025 091

For those who require emotional support contact the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, NSW Department of Justice. The unit can be contacted on:

▲ **Phone:** 1800 227 772

Contact the National Dementia Helpline to discuss strategies to manage and prevent wandering behaviour, access support and information about dementia and to obtain details of the Safely Home Program and Identification Cards. The helpline can be contacted on:

▲ **Phone:** 1800 100 500