

DISORIENTATION AND DEMENTIA

Sometimes people with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia become disoriented when outside of the home. Even if a place is familiar, dementia may lead you to become confused about your surroundings and how to find your way home. These symptoms of disorientation and confusion are usually due to physical changes in the brain caused by the disease. For example, memory loss or changes in vision and perception can make familiar environments look unfamiliar.

The risk of becoming lost can occur in the early stages of dementia, or later on in the disease. Even if you are not currently experiencing disorientation, you may want to learn about this type of symptom and how to be prepared. Here are some common examples of when and where people with dementia have become confused or lost:

- Becoming lost while going for a walk – even when taking a usual route.
- Going on a short errand and becoming disoriented.
- Too much information (for example, too much noise) can be overwhelming and may lead to confusion.
- Losing one's sense of direction in a crowd of people.
- Taking a shortcut may lead to confusion about which way to go.
- Becoming lost while driving, even on a familiar route.
- Medication side effects can also lead to confusion.

However, many people with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias take pleasure in being active and enjoying the outdoors. You can help maintain your independence and ensure your own safety by being proactive and planning ahead. On the following page are some strategies that people living with dementia have found helpful. You may also choose to discuss these strategies with your family members or friends and come up with your own ideas to add to the list.

The following strategies have been suggested by people with dementia who are concerned about getting lost:

- My son and I walk together every morning. We take the same route for the same amount of time. If I go alone, the route is familiar and I'm more likely to find my way home. If I'm gone longer than usual, he knows to come looking for me.
- I like to take walks by myself but sometimes my husband comes with me. He doesn't give any directions. He just goes along to make sure I still know where I'm going. I don't always like it, but I know he's right to be concerned.
- I carry an ID card with me when I go out that says who I am and where I live.
- I got to know the neighbours on my walking route and told them about my Alzheimer's so I can ask for directions or help if I feel lost.
- I carry a small pocket tape recorder to record reminders to myself about directions or where my car is parked.
- My wife bought me a voice-activated cell phone. We taped our home phone number to the back of the cell phone so someone can call her if I need help.
- I don't go out of the house by myself in extreme weather. When I'm too warm or too cold, I don't think clearly and I don't want to get lost in bad weather.

Identification Options

An important precaution to take is to ensure that you are wearing some form of identification at all times. Even if you are not currently concerned about becoming lost, it is a good idea to be prepared ahead of time. There are a variety of options to choose from – you may want to talk with your family or friends to determine which type of identification would work best for you. Here are some examples that you may want to consider:

- **Safely Home[®] Program:** A national program offered by the Alzheimer Society of Canada. Registrants receive a bracelet which is engraved with an identification number. The police can determine where you live and who to contact, and ensure that you are returned home safely. Call 1-800-616-8816 or visit www.safelyhome.ca to register.
- **Customized ID Bracelet:** Some individuals with dementia wear a personalized ID bracelet with information such as their name and the phone number and address of a caregiver or family member. Generic bracelets can be purchased at some drugstores or jewelry stores and can be engraved by a jeweler. Also consider sewing ID labels into your clothing.
- **MedicAlert:** A program which provides a medical ID bracelet that lists an individual's medical conditions (including Alzheimer's disease or another dementia). The bracelet issued by this program has a hotline number engraved which emergency personnel can phone to access an individual's medical record. Call 1-800-668-1507 or visit www.medicalert.ca for more information.

- **Locating Devices:** A variety of locating devices, also called personal tracking devices, are now available on the market. Types of devices include GPS, radio frequency, cell phones, and other technologies. These technologies are still new, and the Alzheimer Society does not currently endorse any particular type or brand of locating technology. Contact your local Alzheimer Society of B.C. resource centre or visit www.alzheimerbc.org/wandering.aspx to obtain the information sheet titled “Locating Devices” which includes a checklist for deciding on a device as well as some ethical issues to consider.
- **Identification Kit:** A useful tool developed by the Alzheimer Society of B.C. which helps you organize vital information about yourself such as a physical description, medical conditions, medications, and a current photograph. By placing the kit in a central location (for example, on the refrigerator door) your family can easily share the information with police to assist in the search if you do become lost. To obtain an **Identification Kit**, contact your local Alzheimer Society resource centre, call the Dementia Helpline at 1-800-936-6033, or visit www.alzheimerbc.org/wandering.aspx

No one likes to think about getting lost, however, taking some precautions and discussing them with those who care about you can help keep you safe now and in the future.

References:

Strategies are reprinted with permission from: Snyder, L. (2010). Living your best with early-stage Alzheimer's: An essential guide (pp. 87-88). North Branch, MN: Sunrise River Press. ISBN 978-1-934716-03-8, www.sunriseriverpress.com, 651-277-1400.

Warner, M. (2006). *In search of the Alzheimer's Wanderer: A workbook to protect your loved one*. Indiana: Purdue University Press.

Alzheimer Society of BC Provincial Office

300 - 828 West 8th Ave.

T: 604.681.6530

www.alzheimerbc.org

Vancouver, B.C. V5Z 1E2

Toll-free: 1-800.667.3742

info@alzheimerbc.org