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Taking charge of safety

Safety First is a good rule to live by, but how often do we forget or ignore it? It's easy to, I know. But we all should make a concerted effort to live safely.

When it comes to taking charge of our personal safety, this issue of *Insight* is a good start. We have included lots of little reminders and are going to include some safety first items I bet you never thought about.

When a lot of us have lived in our homes for years, perhaps decades, we ignore potential safety issues because they've always been there. When we were younger and healthier the throw rugs, for example, made the house look warm and the living room a place of welcome. Now that we are older and have the added issue of Alzheimer's or another dementia, perhaps the throw rugs are an issue. But because they've always been there you don't even recognize them as a safety concern.

With our diagnosis comes a bit of clumsiness, doesn't it? So obviously tripping could be a big possibility. And what about colour? I know myself with a little carpet in the basement, with the type and size of design on the carpet I am sometimes confused and it can make me lose my footing.

And that's what I'm talking about for this issue – reminders to watch, to be aware of our surroundings and to be safe. We want as many readers of *Insight* as we can, so be safe in your own home and in your community. Enjoy another issue of *Insight*!



Jim Mann is the Honourary Editor of *Insight*. He is an active volunteer who advocates on behalf of and for people with dementia. Diagnosed with Early Onset Dementia in February 2007, at the age of 58, Jim is determined to help make a difference in the lives of people who are affected by the disease. As an experienced public policy professional, Jim provides critical advocacy advice to the Alzheimer Society of B.C. and the Alzheimer Society of Canada.

Household safety tips

General tips for preventing falls:

- Remove throw rugs and clutter from the floor.
- Fix any uneven ground outside the home.
- Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes with non-slip soles.
- Have a physiotherapist assess your mobility. Consistently use a cane or walker if recommended.
- Make sure frequently travelled areas are well lit.
- Put brightly coloured tape or paint around the edges of steps or around the bathtub.
- Use a non-slip shower mat and a sturdy shower bench, and install grab rails in the bathroom.
- Avoid use of bath oils or talcum powder (these can create slippery floors).



Safety on the stairs:

- Consider adding a ramp with a slip-proof surface up outdoor steps.
- Ensure a handrail is placed on either side of stairs or ramps for safety.
- Remove reading glasses when climbing stairs.
- Never carry objects such as laundry baskets while using the stairs.

Tips for cooking safely:

- Purchase appliances with automatic shut-offs.
- Make sure smoke alarms are in working order and there is a fire extinguisher in the kitchen.
- Always set timers when you are cooking.
- Purchase food items that are non-perishable, such as canned goods.

Tips for medication safety:

- Keep an updated list of all medications and instructions on when and how to take them.
- Store medications in a dry and dark location. Keep in original packaging.
- Consider using a 7-day pill organizer, a blister pack, or a pill dispenser with a timer. Ask your pharmacist about what is available.
- Regularly check your medications to ensure that nothing has expired.
- Inform your physician and pharmacist of all medications you take, including vitamins and supplements. Don't hesitate to ask questions.
- Keep prescriptions filled and bring extra medication when travelling in case of delays.

Sources: *Research Report: Living Alone* – Alzheimer Society of Canada; *At Home with Alzheimer's Disease: Useful Adaptations to the Home Environment* – Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

Driving and dementia

By Richard Taylor

Several years ago while driving home from teaching a high school class, I was suddenly aware that I was steering my car across eight lanes of oncoming traffic! That was enough to scare me. I voluntarily stopped driving the next day.



For many people, like me, who wake up each morning and arm wrestle with Dr. Alzheimer's until they fall asleep that evening, giving up driving is the most difficult decision for them and their caregivers to make ... and accept. What I did not realize was that I was also giving up my personal freedom – to come and go as I pleased, the subliminal giant root supporting my resistance to give up driving.

Some of us, people living with one of the diseases of dementia, are honestly unaware of a problem, and are totally perplexed by the suggestion that our driving is less than excellent. Understandably, we become quite defensive when family members try to take our car keys.

Here are some of Richard's suggestions for how families can support people with dementia who eventually will no longer be able to drive safely. You may find it helpful to share some of these suggestions with your own family members:

- Whenever possible, begin talking about driving early in the disease process – pre-prepare me for what might be to come. Waiting to cross this bridge when you come to it is definitely not the right road to start out on. Early on, early stage, everyone creating a family road map seems to be a better answer.
- Act now. It would be best not to wait until the car is in the shop being repaired from the accident.
- Don't jump on me with the gang of seven. Everyone out of the room! We first need to try talking about this one-on-one, and it needs to take place over a couple of weeks.
- Remember that for many of us, due to the impact of the disease on our thought processes, we sometimes lack the concentration to generate insights.
- Contact neighbors, friends, or volunteers who could drive for me, helping to dissolve my fears of being stuck at home.

Adapted from: *Richard's Views: The Best Way to Get Him/Her to Stop Driving*, Alzheimer's Daily News

Living alone

Many people who are diagnosed with dementia continue to live alone and successfully maintain their independence. If you are still safely living alone, the best way to avoid injury and maximize your independence is to take precautions that minimize unsafe conditions. Below are some suggestions on how to increase your safety and independence while living alone.



If you live in an apartment building and you get disoriented finding your way home:

- Mark your door with a distinctive item (such as a wreath, flag, or decoration) so it is easily recognizable.
- Write your floor number on your key.
- Tell someone in your apartment complex who you trust that you may need help at times.

If you often misplace your keys:

- Attach a large bright key ring to them for easy identification.
- Put your keys on an elastic wrist band or a lanyard (around your neck) to lower your risk of losing them.
- When you arrive home, put your keys in a designated, clearly marked spot.
- If you carry a purse, attach keys to your purse handle for easy access.
- Give a copy of your keys to someone you trust.

General safety tips for living alone:

- Review the **Household safety tips** listed on page 2 of this edition of *Insight*.
- If kitchen safety is a concern, consider using meal services available in your community, such as Meals on Wheels.
- Keep all emergency phone numbers by the phone.
- Store cleaning products and other toxic substances in their own cabinet and label it “hazardous”.

Safety and independence are important issues for all people with dementia. As dementia progresses, short term memory and the ability to learn new tasks diminishes. Some people can recognize when living alone is no longer safe, while others are unaware of unsafe conditions.

Therefore, you may want to consider any safety issues as early as possible. Discuss your safety with family members or friends and determine a plan for how you can get the support you need when the time comes that living alone may no longer be safe.

Sources: *At Home with Alzheimer's Disease – Useful Adaptations to the Home Environment*, Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation; *Living Alone*, Alzheimer Society of Canada.

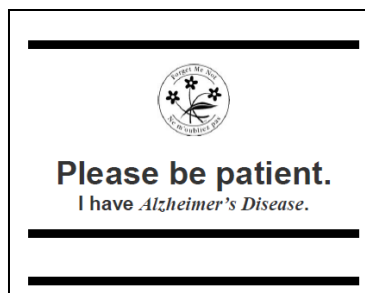
Living safely in your community

Living safely with dementia isn't only about safety in the home environment. It is also important to consider safety risks within our larger communities. Unfortunately, there is still a stigma associated with dementia, and many people who live in your community may not have sufficient knowledge and awareness of the disease. This page contains some strategies for ensuring your safety while out and about in your community. Some of these suggestions may also help to increase the level of awareness and knowledge about the disease for people you come into contact with.

- Try to shop at the same store so that employees can get to know you and you can build a trusting relationship with them.
- Shop at stores that have a monitor on the cash register where you can see how much each item is, and how much change you are owed.
- Carry a personal identification card with you in your pocket or wear an ID bracelet when you go for a walk or anytime you are not carrying a wallet.
- If possible, stick with familiar locations and routes.
- Write down the address of the location you are heading to, and bring it with you when you leave your home. Ask someone for directions if needed.
- Keep keys, wallet, and other important items on a chain or bungee cord so they do not get lost.
- One person with dementia said, "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."
- Another person with dementia said, "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."
- Consider carrying courtesy cards printed with phrases such as, "*Please be patient – I have dementia.*" You can discreetly hand these cards to store clerks, restaurant staff, and other people you interact with. Most people will respond by giving you extra time, space and assistance if needed.

Courtesy cards can also help reduce the stigma associated with dementia by making others aware that people with the disease can continue to live well in their community.

Templates which you can use to print your own courtesy cards, such as those shown below, are available from your local Alzheimer Society of B.C. resource centre.



In our own words

We asked people living with dementia a series of questions related to maintaining and increasing personal safety. Below are some of the responses we received.

1) Have you had any safety concerns since receiving your diagnosis?

‘Getting lost is a significant safety concern.’

“I have concerns about my financial safety.”

“We look at safety in a holistic way, encompassing most aspects of life.”

2) Have you taken any actions to maintain or enhance your safety? What are your safety tips for others living with dementia?

“Install and use grip handles. Install more than one if necessary. Make sure you can reach them.”

“Get a bathtub bench and use it.”

“Don’t hurry – take your time.”

“Put emergency phone numbers on the fridge; include the doctor’s number.”

“Ensure that you take your medications appropriately. I have an alarm watch to remember to take my medications.”

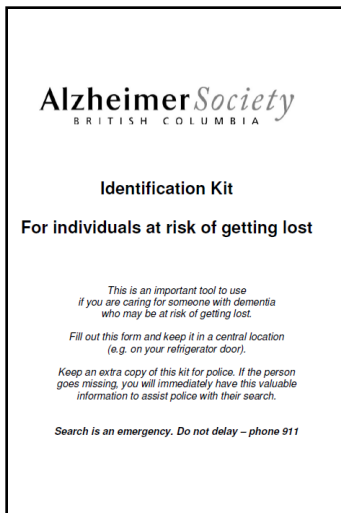
“Personal safety is tied closely to remembering, in many cases. For example, keeping house keys on a lanyard is one way to prevent loss of keys, and thus maintain home safety.”

3) In what ways would you like your care partner/family members/friends to play a role in maintaining your personal safety?

“Make sure someone you trust has a key so if you need help they can come in and help you.”

“Consider asking a knowledgeable and trustworthy advocate to help with your finances.”

“Assist me in finding new ways or adaptations to maintain my current leisure activities.”



Identification Kit

Disorientation and confusion are common symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias. Even if a place is familiar, dementia may lead you to become confused about your surroundings and how to find your way home. The risk of becoming lost can occur in the early stages of dementia, or later on in the disease.

The **Identification Kit** is a useful tool developed by the Alzheimer Society of B.C. It 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 a search if you become lost. To obtain a copy of the **Identification Kit**, and to learn more strategies:

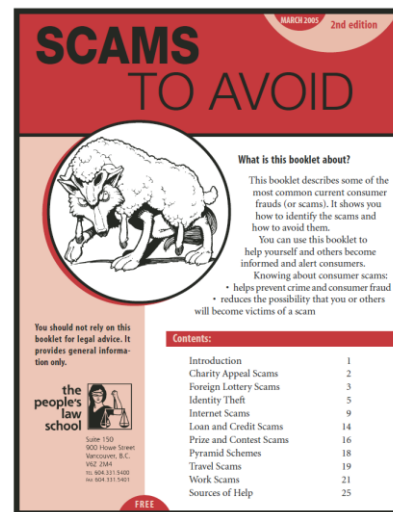
- contact your local Alzheimer Society of B.C. resource centre,
- call the Dementia Helpline at 1-800-936-6033 (or 604-681-8651)
- or visit www.alzheimerbc.org/wandering.aspx

Scams to Avoid

Another way to increase your level of safety is to be aware of potential threats to the safety of your finances. Published by People’s Law School, **Scams to Avoid** is a booklet that describes some of the most common current consumer frauds (or scams). It shows you how to identify the scams and how to avoid them. You can use this booklet to help yourself and others become informed and alert consumers.

Some examples of the scams described in the booklet include:

- foreign lottery scams
- identity theft
- internet scams



Knowing about consumer scams helps prevent crime and consumer fraud and reduces the possibility that you or others will become victims of a scam.

To obtain a copy of the **Scams to Avoid** booklet, contact your local Alzheimer Society of B.C. resource centre. You can also download a copy of the booklet from the People’s Law School website at www.publiclegaled.bc.ca.

Notes and events

DEMENTIA HELPLINE

Alzheimer Society
BRITISH COLUMBIA

1-800-936-6033

(Lower Mainland 604-681-8651)
Tuesday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Helping people with dementia, their friends, and their family members to build the confidence to maintain quality of life when facing dementia.



Our Vision

Our ultimate vision is to create a world without Alzheimer's disease and related dementias.

Our Mission

The Alzheimer Society of B.C. exists to alleviate the personal and social consequences of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, to promote public awareness and to search for the causes and the cures.

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Contribute to Insight!

We really want you to feel part of this bulletin. You can contribute in the following ways:

- Send us news from your support group. For example, what topics of interest or activities have you covered?
- Submit articles on how to live a full and meaningful life after a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or another dementia.
- Drop off photographs.

Send your contributions to the Alzheimer Society of B.C.

(Attention: *Insight*)

Fax: 604-669-6907

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Mail: Alzheimer Society of B.C.
300-828 West 8th Avenue
Vancouver, BC V5Z 1E2

By Us For Us[®] Guides

The **By Us For Us[®] Guides** are produced at the University of Waterloo by the Murray Alzheimer Research and Education Program.

What makes these guides particularly useful is that they are created **by** persons with dementia **for** persons with dementia. They are designed to equip persons with dementia with the necessary tools to enhance their well being and manage daily challenges.

The Guides can be downloaded at <http://www.marep.uwaterloo.ca/products/bufu.html> or ordered by calling (519) 888-4567.