

HOME SAFETY

General Safety in the Home:

Safety in the home is always an issue of concern. For a person with Alzheimer's disease, even everyday situations and activities can lead to safety hazards. Adopting a "safety first" attitude can help prepare you for possible emergencies. As you assess the home environment, try to look at the world through the individual's eyes. Because Alzheimer's disease leads to problems with memory and vision, almost anything - an open door, a throw rug, kitchen appliances, a hot water tap - can become potentially dangerous. Keep in mind the following tips when assessing your home for potential safety hazards.

Focus on preventing, not teaching:

Rather than trying to teach or retrain the person to do things safely, you may be more successful by taking preventative action.

Be patient and slow down:

Keep in mind that many accidents occur when the person with Alzheimer's disease is rushed.

Simplify routines:

Many accidents occur in the area of personal care (bathing, toileting, dressing or eating). Avoid accidents by breaking down complicated procedures, guiding the person through a simple, step-by-step process.

Create emergency plans:

Always keep available a working fire extinguisher; a basic first aid kit with bandages and antiseptic, and prepare a list of emergency numbers to keep near the phone. Include numbers for police and fire departments, hospitals, and poison control centre.

Preventing Falls:

To prevent stumbles or tripping, check wall-to-wall carpeting for buckling.

- Contact a carpet installer to take out or secure any irregular areas.
- Tape the edges of area rugs to the floor with double-sided carpet tape.
- Immediately wipe up any spills on bare flooring.
- Use non-slip wax finish on floors and keep floor surfaces uncomplicated.
- Remove or rearrange lamp cords, or any low furniture to create a clear pathway with enough room to help reduce the risk of falls. Remember, when rearranging furniture, take care not to move furniture to the point where the look of your home changes. Familiarity is very important for the person with Alzheimer's disease and too much change will cause confusion.
- The person with Alzheimer's disease needs to be steady on his or her feet. Select footwear with flat, broad-soled shoes. Tennis or walking shoes with good support are a good choice.
- Keep staircases and hallways free of clutter and well lit. For proper lighting, change light bulbs to a higher wattage and use bulbs that have a soft light to reduce glare. Make sure that lamps have glare-reducing shades, and use window shades or blinds to reduce glare created by sunlight.

Preventing Accidental Poisoning:

- Lock kitchen cabinets that contain dangerous substances such as cleaning supplies.
- Maintain a clean refrigerator. A person with Alzheimer's disease may not be able to distinguish between rotten food and edible food.
- Collect and put away any medications in a locked cabinet.
- Beware of houseplants, some of them may be toxic. Dispose of potentially poisonous plants, or give them away to family and friends.

Bathroom Safety:

People with Alzheimer's disease may be unable to distinguish water temperature. To avoid scalding, dial down the temperature setting on the hot water heater or install anti-scalding devices, restricting the amount of hot water that can be used in a faucet.

- Use a non-skid mat in the bathtub or shower.
- Install washable, rubber-backed bathroom carpeting to reduce chances of falls.
- Install grab bars by the toilet and tub, or clamp a grip handle to the side of the tub.
- Use a plasticized seat and a shower hose to allow the person to sit down in the tub.
- Purchase a deep soap container to keep soap from falling into the tub or on the floor.
- Stick contrasting coloured tape around the tub to help define its edges and depth.
- Install a contrasting coloured toilet seat to help define the fixture.
- Rent a raised toilet seat to make getting up and down from the toilet easier.
- Remove any wastebaskets which may be mistakenly used as a toilet.
- Put away all electrical appliances and insert safety plugs into outlets.
- Always leave a night light on in the bathroom.

Kitchen Safety:

- Hide away sharp knives, scissors and other potentially dangerous appliances in locked cupboards.
- Leave counter tops bare if items and food tend to be stuffed into pockets or to be lost.
- Use an electric kettle with an automatic shut-off.
- Remove and hide sink stopper to avoid accidental overflow.
- Supervise all cooking.
- When not working in the kitchen, remove and hide stove control knobs, or turn off gas or electricity directed to stove.

Other Safety and Security Measures:

- Place locks out of the normal line of vision on outside doors.
- Remove locks from all inside doors.
- Put hedges or fences around the yard and place locks on gates to prevent wandering.
- Keep outside lights off at night to discourage the individual from leaving the house.
- Disguise windows and doors with decorations to distract the person from leaving.
- Install bells or an electronic alarm system on exit doors.

Resources:

- Home Care for People with Alzheimer's Disease: Home Safety, An Aspen Publication, 1995.
- At Home with Alzheimer's Disease, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1990.