

## WANDERING

### What is wandering?

Wandering refers to the need to keep on the move, often seen in people with Alzheimer's disease.

- The wandering behaviour may appear to be aimless or confused, or it may be focused on getting to a particular destination or pursuing a particular goal.
- Wandering may occur at any time of the day or night, and may take the person out of the home.
- Wandering outdoors can expose the person to such dangers as traffic or unsafe weather conditions.

### What causes wandering?

- Wandering is a common behaviour for a person with Alzheimer's disease.
- It is a direct result of physical changes in the brain.
- Short-term memory loss and inability to reason or to make judgments contribute to wandering behaviour.

### How can wandering be managed?

- In itself, wandering is not a harmful behaviour.
- When done in a safe environment, it can be a healthy outlet for a person with Alzheimer's disease.
- Channeling wandering into a safe activity involves looking at all the potential triggers of the behaviour.
- By determining what may be contributing to the behaviour, it may then be possible to figure out ways to manage it.

### Reasons for Wandering

A person with Alzheimer's disease may wander for a variety of reasons. She may be:

- too hot or too cold
- hungry or in pain
- trying to recreate a situation from her past, such as going to work or catching a bus

As a caregiver, pinpointing the reason behind wandering can be a challenging task, especially when verbal communication has become difficult. Looking at non-verbal clues may help you establish the reason for the wandering:

- Is there a pattern to the behaviour?
- Does the wandering appear aimless or confused?
- Is there a particular purpose to the wandering?

Being able to find the pattern of wandering can help you identify why the person wanders. Once this is determined, you can begin to put strategies in place to manage the behaviour.

Following are some of the types of wandering associated with Alzheimer's disease and some possible reasons for the behaviour.

### Aimless wandering

- non-focused walking with little or no direction or destination

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- it may take place because the person is bored or needs to exercise
  - it may be the person's response to feeling of stress or physical discomfort

### **Purposeful wandering**

- goal-oriented wandering
- the person may appear to be searching for something or trying to return to familiar surroundings from her past
- she may be looking for security and reassurance in her life
- she may have a physical need, such as hunger or the need to use the washroom

### **Night-time wandering**

- night hours are often a time for wandering
- broken sleep patterns may cause restlessness and disorientation in the middle of the night
- confusion about time may also cause the person to be unaware of the difference between day and night
- she may wake, get out of bed and go to the kitchen to look for something to eat or try to get dressed

### **Industrious wandering**

- the person may incorporate repetitive behaviour into her wandering
- in her need to keep busy, she may continue habits, or recreate schedules or routines established long ago, such as trying to go to work or catch a bus

### **Managing wandering**

The following strategies may help you manage wandering in the person with Alzheimer's disease.

#### **Allow safe wandering**

- Wandering is often a coping mechanism for the person with Alzheimer's disease. A safe and secure environment in which she may wander freely can often provide the person with a healthy outlet for feelings of anxiety or upset.
- A fenced backyard can ensure that the person with Alzheimer's disease is able to wander safely outdoors.
- If there are doors to the outside that you do not want her to open, place locks where she cannot reach or see them. If she is able to get past the locks, a bell or alarm that signals when the door is opened is a good safety precaution.
- A safety gate across doors or stairs may help keep the wandering person in a limited area where she can explore freely.
- A sound-sensitive monitor placed in the same area as the individual may help you keep track of her whereabouts within the house.

#### **Look at the immediate environment**

- If you notice that wandering happens consistently in reaction to the person's immediate environment, try changing those conditions (e.g., heat or cold, noise, fear of the dark, etc.). This may help to reduce the wandering.

#### **Develop meaningful activities**

- A person with Alzheimer's disease may be able to participate in day-to-day activities, such as doing

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simple chores or helping with household duties.

- Consider past skills and interests when presenting activities.
- Try another activity if she shows signs of becoming bored.

### **Exercise**

- Try to get the person with Alzheimer's disease into a regular exercise program.
- If possible, go for walks outside with her, or take her to the mall.
- Regular exercise can use up extra energy, and may help her sleep better.

### **Reduce the triggers**

- The environment around the person with Alzheimer's disease will often trigger her wandering behaviour. It may be helpful to remove items that trigger a desire to go outside.
- Hiding car keys or items of clothing associated with outdoors, such as jackets, may help in discouraging wandering behaviour.
- Consider disguising doors to the outside by covering them or decorating them so that they don't appear to be doors.

### **Provide visual cues**

- Even in familiar places, a person with Alzheimer's disease can become confused or lost. Familiar objects, furniture and pictures can give the person a sense of comfort and belonging.
- Consider placing labels on doors and in rooms so that she can easily find her way through the house. For example, a picture of a bed may help her locate her bedroom.
- Disorientation at night may be reduced by leaving a light on in the hallway or providing an illuminated clock by the bed.

### **Keep records**


- A diary or log may be helpful in understanding the wandering behaviour. A Personal Care Book (available from your local Alzheimer Society chapter or by using the online order form) provides a record-keeping tool for keeping this information in one place.
- Keep an ongoing record of times of wandering, patterns and cues.
- Make a note of any ideas you have as to why the incident occurred, how long it lasted, and what seemed to help you manage the behaviour.
- Include in your records daily notes regarding the type of clothing the individual is wearing.
- To prepare for the possibility of wandering, keep an up-to-date photo of the person handy (or in the back pocket of your Caregiver Handbook, available when you register the person with the Safely Home™ -- Alzheimer Wandering Registry program). You can also use the Wandering Record section, at the back of the handbook, to record information such as the make, model and licence number of your car, as well as any credit card numbers that might be used by the person.

### **Establish community contact**

- Let others in your neighbourhood know about the potential of the person with Alzheimer's disease to wander.
- Ask friends, neighbours, local businesses and Block Parents to stay alert to the possibility, and to call you if they suspect that the individual is wandering.

### **Make the most of Safely Home**

- To get the most from Safely Home, it is important to ensure that the person with Alzheimer's disease has identification with her at all times.

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- Wearing the bracelet, provided by Safely Home, is the quickest link to the program in the event that the individual becomes lost.
  - The identification cards provided by Safely Home can be placed in pockets or wallets to provide backup should the bracelet become lost.
  - Ensure that you have filled in the person's name and registration number on the cards.
  - Another method of identification which police will look for is labelling on clothing. Labels can be attached to the inside collar of such items as jackets, shirts and blouses. All labels should include the person's name and registration number.
  - If any registration information changes, contact your local Alzheimer Society or call 1-800-616-8816.