

# Safety for People with Dementia

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## **When is my family member with dementia no longer safe alone?**

There is no easy answer to this question. Every person with dementia and every family is unique. For example, the progression of the disease, how the person responds to the disease and the environment the person lives in are factors that can impact safety. Also, all of us have differing levels of risk acceptance, that is, how comfortable we are with taking risks. Within a family there can be very different ideas about what is an acceptable level of risk.

Although there are no easy answers, the key is to carefully assess for safety risk. Here's a list of things to consider as you make decisions about the safety of your family member.

- **Smoking.** Does your family member smoke? If so, does she leave burning cigarettes unattended? This can happen when someone has memory loss. If the person has a progressive dementia such as Alzheimer's disease, this can become a dangerous problem. Sometimes the person forgets about smoking altogether. Working on ways to cutback or quit smoking will become important.
- **Leaving the stove on.** This can become dangerous when people are burning pots and pans on a regular basis. There are straightforward ways to handle this: automatic shut off electric tea kettles, disabling the stove by removing knobs or turning off circuits. An electrician can install automatic shut off timers on stoves and ovens.
- **Responding to emergencies.** Would your family member know what to do in an emergency? You may want to ask a question like "what would

you do if there was a fire?” However, even if the person can answer it correctly doesn't always mean he/she can actually do what's needed. It's important to ask him/her to show you how they would call 911, leave the house and go to the neighbor's, etc.

- **Getting lost.** Does your family member leave the house alone? Go for walks? The National Alzheimer's Association estimates that about 60% of people with Alzheimer's disease will “wander” (which means they get lost, often in a well-known place). If your family member is going out alone, it would be good to buy a safety system such as the Safe Return program through the Alzheimer's Association (1-800-272-3900; [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)). Safe Return is a medic-alert bracelet with an 800 number on it which hooks into a national database of emergency contact numbers. There are also GPS systems, such as Comfort Zone, which is endorsed by the Alzheimer's Association.

Some people are afraid to leave the house and may never be at risk of getting lost, but may be at risk in a fire or other emergency.

- **Leaving the house at night.** Some people with dementia get days and nights mixed up and may be up and dressed in the middle of the night. If this is becoming a problem or if the person has ever left the house in the middle of the night, then it becomes important to think about supervision at night. If other people are in the house, it may mean securing the doors, either with an alarm system or with simple door securing devices designed for children (try Toys-R-Us childproofing section). If the person is alone nights and has ever left the house during the night, he/she is probably not safe alone at night.
- **Opening the door to strangers.** What does your family member do if someone rings the doorbell? Does he/she open the door to strangers? People with dementia slowly lose the ability to make safe/good decisions and judgments. This can become very dangerous if the person is likely to answer the door and invite a stranger in or give the person money.

- **Giving money away.** Mail, phone, and computer solicitations make life dangerous for people with poor judgment. People with dementia are at high risk for being take advantage of financially. This can happen with strangers or relatives. Sometimes it is a matter of giving donations, but doing so repeatedly. Repeated credit card purchases can lead to financial problems. If mail is the issue, one approach is to get a PO Box and have someone else in the family monitor it. Phones can be changed to unlisted numbers. Computers may be more difficult to monitor if your family member is still able to use a computer. It may become important to limit access to money or to leave a small amount in a checking account for the person to use.
- **Falling often.** If your family member is falling often, safety alone becomes a problem. In the early stages of dementia the person may be able to use a cell phone or a lifeline system to call for help, but as the disease progresses it is likely that he/she will not be able to remember to use it.
- **Trying former hobbies.** Some hobbies - hunting, woodworking, cooking, and sewing, mowing the lawn - may involve machines that are possibly very dangerous. Closely watching the person's ability to handle equipment safely becomes very important. Guns and ammunition should be locked up. Sometimes it becomes important to remove tools or appliances from the person's home or to keep them under lock and key.
- **Handling alcohol, medications, and household toxins.** It is very important to monitor both alcohol and medications. You may want to ask your family member's doctor about the right amount of alcohol that is safe. If medications are simple, your family member may be able to manage them safely for a while. Some families gradually take over giving medications; others use alarmed dispensers. At some point locking up medications may be important to stop a person with memory loss from

accidentally taking too much medicine. Also, pay attention to household cleaners that may be used in the wrong way.

- **Calling frequently or exhibiting a lot of anxiety.** If your family member calls a lot, this is probably a sign that he/she is feeling anxious and is looking for support. This may be a good time to think about increased supervision or a companion. It is not surprising when people with memory loss feel anxious. They often forget important pieces of information to help them understand what they are supposed to be doing. That kind of anxiety may lead to safety risks such as leaving the house or inviting strangers in because they are looking for reassurance.
- **Living Alone.** When should a person with dementia no longer live alone? Again, there are no easy answers. Often families slowly bring people into the home part time as companions or housekeepers. Your family member may be safe for short periods of time alone, but not for 24 hours, seven days a week. Sometimes families arrange for their family member to spend nights at a relative's house. Most often a blend of approaches is tried: home care, adult day programs, regularly scheduled time with family and friends. Paying attention to the signs listed above can help you determine when your family member may no longer be safe alone.

**Good resource on home safety:**

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/Publications/homesafety.htm>