

Wandering

Wandering is something that many persons with Alzheimer's may do at different stages of their disease. The wandering can happen in many different ways. It could be daytime wandering or a tendency to wander at night. It is difficult to understand exactly why the person wanders, are they looking for a place, or looking for a particular person, or trying to find something? Are they trying to leave an environment where they are uncomfortable? Or is it something else? There are times when we think we may understand the reasons, but mostly it is inexplicable. Sometimes the persons may even say they are going to meet a friend, or going to work, or going "home." The last being the most upsetting answer for the caregiver who puts in such a lot of effort to maintain a safe and comfortable home. In this case their concept of home may be their childhood home with their parents.

Once they are out of the house, they may not be able to find their way back home due to memory loss and problems with orientation. If their communication has become bad they may not be able to ask for help, or may not even realise that they just need to ask someone for help. Sometimes they may not remember their address. There have even been instances where adults who had full time attendants have wandered off, in some cases with unhappy outcomes.

Trying to Understand: We need to understand the possible reasons for the wandering and try and provide alternatives to avoid it. We also must find and implement ways to ensure that the risk of wandering is minimised. Since every person is different, and every environment brings its own challenges, there is no "one size fits all" solution for anything in the world of Alzheimer's. What works with one person may not work with another, and what works today may not work tomorrow with the same person. The key is to be patient, innovative and understand that even when our efforts seem to not work, we have not failed as caregivers because we are still continuing our caregiving.

There may be a pattern to the wandering. Does it happen at a particular time? For example, at the time to normally go to office, or time for the evening walk. In that case, maybe a little accompanied walk around can satisfy the desire. There may be triggers from external sounds that cause the wandering, such as thinking that someone is calling them, or needing to go out and check if a car is honking outside. Observing them, talking to them and gently trying to understand their need may help.

It helps to check if the person is uncomfortable in their current location. Are they possibly feeling cold, or too warm, or do they need to go to the toilet? They may even be hungry or have a desire to go and eat a particular chaat or fruit from a roadside vendor!

Things we can do: There are many small interventions that people have tried to use to help curb wandering. The person may be in the habit of wearing a special pair of footwear to go out in, ensuring that those are not accessible can often alert you to their need to step out of the house. Other suggestions are; placing dark doormats or bead curtains in doorways which may make the person reluctant to cross the doorway; covering door handles with napkins; putting "do not use this door" signs on doors and even concealing doors with curtains. These may help decrease the attempts to leave the house.

It is a good practice to take the person out for walks and even have them accompany you for your shopping or other chores when possible. This also provides them with stimulation that may help in their behaviour the rest of the day, and keep them healthy and active for longer. Such small protected outings have the added benefit of ensuring that the person is seen by the shops that you frequent and other residents around your house. If at any point the person leaves home alone, they may recognise them and may be helpful in guiding them back. An identity bracelet, or a name and number stitched onto their clothing can be helpful in case the worst does happen.

Plan Activities: Keeping the person occupied may help with the wandering, by eliminating boredom and also by distracting them from the cause of wandering. Having a plan for the day helps, because the fact that the person is occupied reduces the chances of wanting to get up and leave to go elsewhere. Creation of activities is an important part of caregiving, the importance of creating activities for the person cannot be overstressed. You need to be patient, innovative and accepting when you are trying to create activities. Do read our help sheet on activities.

Secure your residence: For a person who is known to be wandering, it is important to ensure that the doors to the house are secured by locks that cannot be easily opened. Putting in new bolts at the bottom of the door, or at the top can probably help as the person may not be able to find out how the door is closed. The expense of setting up new locks is a necessity to prevent unfortunate incidences from occurring. A door alarm or buzzer that goes off when the door is opened also helps a lot. However, an alarm is not sufficient as it is not fool proof; the buzzer may sometimes not be heard, or may be ignored when the person uses the door. Installing an alarm does not cover the eventuality of the door being left open by somebody.



Inform others: All family members, visitors, vendors, and any domestic staff need to understand the real danger of wandering. It helps to inform everyone who comes to the house of the possibility, at the same time it is best to try and do it as gently as possible, maintaining the dignity of the person. "We don't want Maa to wander out and get lost." "It's risky to leave doors open because Dada may step out and may not find his way back...may get hurt..." Often people do not wish to disclose the problem to others in the family and outside, but hiding the situation makes management ultimately more difficult. If you don't know what to say to others, you can give them our book on dementia or refer them to our website.

Let us know what works for you.