



# AFP

AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE

Wandering is common among people with dementia  
and can lead to them going missing

NATIONAL MISSING PERSONS COORDINATION CENTRE

FACT SHEET



## ▶ Missing persons and dementia: wandering

Carers of people with dementia may at some point be faced with what to do if the person begins to wander.

Wandering is quite common among people with dementia and can be very distressing for them and those concerned for their safety. The person's failing memory and declining ability to communicate may make it impossible for them to explain why they wandered, or remember how to make contact their carers or how to get home.

The greatest risk associated with wandering is that the person with dementia leaves the safety of their home unaccompanied and gets lost, becoming a missing person.

### Reasons for wandering

#### Changed environment

A person with dementia may feel uncertain and disoriented in a new environment such as a new house or residential facility. The person may also want to escape from a noisy or busy environment.

#### Loss of memory

Wandering may be due to a loss of short-term memory. A person may set off to go to the shop or a friend's house, and then forget where they were going or why.

#### Searching for the past

As people become more confused, they may wander off in search of someone, or something relating to their past. This may be a partner who has died or a house they lived in as a child.

#### Excess energy

Wandering can be a way of using up excess energy, which may indicate that the person needs more regular exercise.

#### Expressing boredom

As dementia progresses people find it harder to concentrate for any length of time. Wandering may be their way of keeping occupied.

#### Confusing night with day

People with dementia may suffer from insomnia, or wake in the early hours and become disoriented. They may think it is daytime and decide to go for a walk.

#### Continuing a habit

People who have been used to walking long distances may simply wish to continue doing so.

**Agitation**

Agitation can cause some people to pace up and down or to wander off with no apparent purpose. They may fail to recognise their own home and insist on leaving.

**Discomfort or pain**

Walking may ease discomfort, so it is important to find out if there is any physical problem or medical condition and try to deal with it. Tight clothing, excessive heat or needing to find a toilet can all cause problems.

**A job to perform**

Sometimes people leave the house because they believe they have a job to do, or are confused about the time of day, or the season.

**Dreams**

An inability to differentiate dreams from reality may cause the person to respond to something that they dreamed, thinking that this has happened in real life.

**If a person with dementia goes missing...**

- Stay calm and make a thorough search of the house, surrounding areas and/or aged care facility. Notify your neighbours, family and/or carers.
- Walk or drive around the block and immediate area and to any place the person may regularly visit. If possible, have somebody stay at home in case the person returns or to answer the phone.
- Notify the local police and file a missing person's report (reports over the phone are only accepted in South Australia). Advise the police that the person has dementia and of any concerns for their safety. It is important to provide police with the following information:
  - a physical description of the missing person including distinguishable features

- a description of what the person was wearing
- a recent photograph of the missing person
- where and when the person was last seen or heard
- places the person may visit
- a list of any medical problems or medications the person may need
- names and contact details of family members and friends.

**When the missing person returns home...**

Immediately notify family and/or their aged care facility and the police (if the missing person has not been located by them).

Do not scold or show anxiety no matter how worried or inconvenienced you may have been. They may have been confused and frightened themselves.

**Dementia content provided by Alzheimer's Australia.**

**For more information****National Missing Persons Coordination Centre**

The NMPCC, Australian Federal Police, provides a national leadership and coordination approach to the Australian Government's response to missing persons. Its mission is to reduce the incidence and impact of missing persons.

The NMPCC works within the PLEASE policy principles of Prevention, Location, Education, Awareness, Support and Evaluation.

Find out more by visiting our website.

**Alzheimer's Australia**

Alzheimer's Australia is the national peak body for people living with dementia, their families and carers. It provides leadership in policy and services.

National Dementia Hotline:  
1800 100 500  
[www.alzheimers.org.au](http://www.alzheimers.org.au)