



Home Safety

for People
with Alzheimer's
Disease

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Introduction

Caring for a person with Alzheimer's Disease (AD) is a challenge that calls upon the patience, creativity, knowledge, and skills of each caregiver. We hope that this booklet will help you cope with some of these challenges and develop creative solutions to increase the security and freedom of the person with AD in your home, as well as your own peace of mind.

This booklet is for those who provide in-home care for people with AD or related disorders. Our goal is to improve home safety by identifying potential problems in the home and offering possible solutions to help prevent accidents.

We begin with a checklist to help you make each room in your home a safer environment for the person with AD. Next, we hope to increase awareness of the ways specific impairments associated with the disease can create particular safety hazards in the home. Specific home safety tips are listed to help you cope with some of the more hazardous behaviors that may occur as the disease advances. We also include tips for managing driving and planning for natural disaster safety. The booklet ends with a list of resources for family caregivers.

What Is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, irreversible disease that affects brain cells and produces memory loss and intellectual impairment in as many as 4 million American adults. This disease affects people of all racial, economic, and educational backgrounds.

AD is the most common cause of dementia in adults. Dementia is defined as loss of memory and intellect that interferes with routine personal, social, or occupational activities. Dementia is not a disease; rather, it is a group of symptoms that may accompany certain diseases or conditions. Other symptoms include changes in personality, mood, or behavior.

Although AD primarily affects people age 65 or older, it also may affect people in their 50s and, although rarely, even younger. Other causes of irreversible dementia include multi-infarct dementia (a series of minor strokes resulting in widespread death of brain tissue), Pick's disease, Binswanger's disease, Parkinson's disease, Huntington's disease, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease), multiple sclerosis, and alcohol abuse. The recommendations in this booklet deal primarily with common problems in AD, but they also may apply to any of the related dementing disorders.

What are the Symptoms of AD?

There is no “typical” person with Alzheimer’s. There is tremendous variability among people with AD in their behaviors and symptoms. At present, there is no way to predict how quickly the disease will progress in any one person, nor to predict the exact changes that will occur. We do know, however, that many of these changes will present problems for caregivers. Therefore, knowledge and prevention are critical to safety.

People with AD have memory problems and cognitive impairment (difficulties with thinking and reasoning), and eventually they will not be able to care for themselves. They may experience confusion, loss of judgment, and difficulty finding words, finishing thoughts, or following directions. They also may experience personality and behavior changes. For example, they may become agitated, irritable, or very passive. Some may wander from home and become lost. They may not be able to tell the difference between day and night, and they may wake up, get dressed, and start to leave the house in the middle of the night thinking that the day has just started. They may suffer from losses that affect vision, smell, or taste.

These disabilities are very difficult, not only for the person with AD, but for the caregiver, family, and other loved ones as well. Caregivers need resources and reassurance to know that while the challenges are great, there are specific actions to take to reduce some of the safety concerns that accompany Alzheimer’s disease.

General Safety Concerns

People with AD become increasingly unable to take care of themselves. However, individuals will move through the disease in their own unique manner. As a caregiver, you face the ongoing challenge of adapting to each change in the person's behavior and functioning. The following general principles may be helpful.

1. Think prevention. It is very difficult to predict what a person with AD might do. Just because something has not yet occurred, does not mean it should not be cause for concern. Even with the best-laid plans, accidents can happen. Therefore, checking the safety of your home will help you take control of some of the potential problems that may create hazardous situations.

2. Adapt the environment. It is more effective to change the environment than to change most behaviors. While some AD behaviors can be managed with special medications prescribed by a doctor, many cannot. You can make changes in an environment to decrease the hazards and stressors that accompany these behavioral and functional changes.

3. Minimize danger. By minimizing danger, you can maximize independence. A safe environment can be a less restrictive environment where the person with AD can experience increased security and more mobility.