

## Making the Home Safer for Individuals with Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias

Creating a safe environment is especially important when you are caring for a person who has Alzheimer's disease or other dementias. As the disease progresses, the person loses cognitive abilities that can greatly affect their safety.

Alzheimer's is not just memory loss. It also affects other cognitive skills including:

- logical thinking
- reasoning
- decision making
- judgment
- problem solving
- abstract thinking
- attention and concentration
- confusion
- language

Because they lose these abilities over time, it is recommended to ensure the environment is safe and easy for them to comprehend. They may also have difficulty with depth perception putting them at risk for falls. Many individuals with Alzheimer's experience hallucinations, delusions and paranoia at some point; all of which can be exacerbated by the environment.

Individuals with Lewy Body dementia or Frontotemporal dementia may have other cognitive problems that could cause safety concerns. Lewy Body dementia causes hallucinations early on in the disease process so it is important to minimize things that could trigger hallucinations and confusion.

Frontotemporal dementia affects impulse control and judgment, also posing potential safety concerns.

Because of their memory loss, individuals with Alzheimer's may only remember some of the steps involved to do something, and it may be the safety factors they forget. They may also be living in the past and not aware of their current abilities and limitations.

For example, an 85 year old man with Alzheimer's may still think he does the repairs in the home when he sees the tools in the corner of the garage. He may not remember that he hasn't used them in ten years and has a handyman who does all the repairs. He could then possibly hurt

himself and damage something in the home if he tries to use the tools incorrectly.

Alzheimer's can also affect how your loved one perceives things and comprehends what they see and hear. Your loved one may not think they are 80 years old and may not recognize their reflection in the mirror. They might see the reflection as a stranger and become fearful, agitated or possibly aggressive.

Because of these reasons and the inability to predict what your loved one may do, it is important for caregivers to continually monitor the environment and do what they can to keep their loved one safe.

The following lists provide tips for each room of the house, along with explanations as to why they pose a safety concern for an individual with Alzheimer's.

**Even if you think your loved one will never do these things, it is better to be safe and prepared.**

## General Home Safety

- Remove guns and weapons from the house.
- Place large knives, scissors and matches in a safe place.
- Remove scatter rugs or use low pile rugs with non-skid backings to prevent falls.
- Keep cords out of walkways, remove knick knacks, baskets and clutter off the floor and walkways to prevent falls.
- Put important documents and valuables in a locked drawer or out of view.
- Check with a local garden store or poison control to make sure your houseplants are safe if ingested. Remove those that are poisonous.
- Do not use holiday decorations that look like food as they may be eaten by mistake.
- Remove all toxic cleaning products and put them in a locked cabinet. Some scented cleaning products, detergents and shampoos have pictures of fruit on the bottles and the person with Alzheimer's may think it is juice. Also, some cleaning products resemble food - Comet and Parmesan cheese containers are both green canisters.
- Keep all over-the-counter medicines, prescriptions, vitamins, herbals and ointments in a locked cabinet or drawer and supervise the administration of medications.
- Put an alarm or bell on the exterior doors to alert you if your loved one tries to leave the home.
- Keep artwork simple. Abstract art can be misunderstood, confusing and upsetting. Pictures of nature are easily recognized and calming.
- Some individuals with Alzheimer's do not recognize themselves in a mirror and can become very upset by the reflection of the "stranger." Remove mirrors in the home and bathroom if your loved one no longer recognizes his or her reflection.
- Place a stop sign on a door to discourage the person with Alzheimer's from entering. Also, you can disguise a door by hanging curtains over it.
- Put liquor and wine in a locked cabinet.

# Safety in the Kitchen

- Remove artificial fruit and magnets that look like food so your loved one doesn't mistakenly eat them.
- Remove excess items from the counters, table and pantry to minimize confusion.
- Remove small electrical appliances, such as the blender and can opener from the counters.
- Reduce the temperature on the hot water heater to 120 degrees to avoid burns if they turn off the cold water first .
- Check the refrigerator regularly and remove spoiled food. A person with Alzheimer's may no longer be able to read expiration dates and recognize when food looks or smells bad.
- Put timers on your appliances or purchase ones with automatic shut off features.
- Do not store pet food and treats in the pantry. Keep it in the original packaging, preferably where the person with Alzheimer's can't easily find.
- Remove cleaning products from under the kitchen sink and only keep a mild dish detergent on top of the sink.
- Supervise the person with Alzheimer's when cooking to insure safety and proper food handling.
- Put pictures on the cabinets and drawers showing the contents inside to reduce frustration and help the person with Alzheimer's find things in the kitchen.
- Make sure there's good color contrast between the chairs and floor to avoid falls and also between the plates and table. Alzheimer's can affect depth perception making it difficult to distinguish where the chair ends and the floor begins.
- Disengage the garbage disposal to avoid potential dangers if they put their hand in to dislodge something.
- Keep the table setting simple at mealtime to minimize confusion.
- Keep knives, kitchen scissors, and sharp kitchen tools in a locked drawer.



# Safety in the Bedroom

- Avoid using a comforter that is a silky or slippery material.
- Use sheets and blankets that are a contrasting color from the floor to reduce the risks of falls. A person with Alzheimer's has trouble with depth perception and may not be able to distinguish where the bed ends if it is the same color as the floor.
- Remove excess clothing from the drawers and the closet to reduction confusion. Keep clothing options to a minimal.
- Keep the bedroom relaxing, clutter free and not over stimulating.
- Remove the mirrors on the wall if the person with Alzheimer's no longer recognizes their reflection.
- Make sure the artwork in the bedroom is very calming so your loved one does not get upset or scared, especially at bedtime. For example, an abstract picture in the popular gold, red, orange and yellow colors may appear as fire. Too many family pictures in the bedroom may also be confusing or upsetting if your loved one thinks the people are actually in the room.
- Keep the pathway to the bathroom clear and use night lights to make it easy to see during the night.
- Limit TV viewing especially before bed as it can be too stimulating and upsetting. The person with Alzheimer's disease cannot always understand what they are watching and some shows can increase confusion, agitation and delusions. Your loved one may hear the news anchor report about a robbery and think the burglar is in the house.
- Put important documents and valuables in a locked drawer or out of view.

## **Safety in the Bathroom**

- Remove the lock on the door so your loved one cannot get locked in the bathroom.
- Remove medicines, first aid products and ointments from the drawers and medicine cabinet to prevent ingesting or using the wrong product.
- Remove electric appliances including hairdryers, electric razors, curling irons etc. The person with Alzheimer's may no longer recognize the danger of putting these items in water.
- Reduce the temperature of the water to 120 degrees to avoid burns if they turn off the cold water first.
- Install grab bars next to the toilet and inside the shower or tub.
- Use rubber backed low pile rugs in a contrasting color from the floor to prevent tripping.
- Keep an automatic night light plugged in so the room never gets dark.
- Keep safety plugs in the electrical outlets.
- Remove the bathroom mirror if the person with Alzheimer's disease no longer recognizes his or her reflection and is fearful of what they see.
- Keep the bathroom door open or put a picture of a toilet on the outside of the door to make it easier for your loved one to find the room.
- Often, individuals with Alzheimer's are fearful or resistant to bathing and toileting. Keep the bathroom décor simple, warm and inviting. If you use a shower curtain, make sure it is not busy or confusing. Use soft towels and keep the bathroom temperature warm.
- A white bathroom (white walls, counters, toilet and white floors) is cold and hard to navigate. Add color to the walls and floors to increase contrast and warmth.