

Caregivers Fact Sheet - Wandering in Dementia

New research has been conducted by faculty at University of Florida which describes the problem of people with dementia wandering away from their caregiver and becoming lost in the community. This fact sheet provides information for caregivers about the problem of wandering in persons with dementia, like Alzheimer's disease.

FACT 1 – WANDERING AWAY AND BECOMING LOST IN THE COMMUNITY IS A COMPLETELY UNPREDICTABLE BEHAVIOR

- while some Alzheimer's patients wander frequently, many do not. However, even those that have never wandered before are at risk of becoming confused, leaving a safe situation and becoming lost in the community. Wandering can occur at any point of the disease even if wandering has never occurred before.
- wandering away most often occurs from the home setting, but can also occur when accompanying the caregiver into the community, or when being cared for in professional settings
- most Alzheimer's patients are safely returned to their caregiver, but some are found injured or even dead in the community

FACT 2 – TYPICALLY ALZHEIMER'S PATIENTS WANDER AWAY ON FOOT AND ARE FOUND WITHIN 5 MILES OF THEIR HOME

- almost 90% of those who wander away are walking, with about 5% leaving in their own car, and a few using public transportation
- almost 90% were found within 5 miles of their home

FACT 3 – ALZHEIMER'S PATIENTS ARE FOUND IN NEIGHBORHOODS, ON STREETS AND HIGHWAYS, AND IN BUSINESSES

- common places included residential yards, commercial businesses such as convenience stores, streets and highways, public businesses such as hospitals and libraries
- a small number were found in remote areas such as woods or fields. The few found dead were all found in woods or fields

FACT 4 – WANDERING HAPPENS IN THE BEST CAREGIVING SITUATIONS

- do not be embarrassed to call for help. Wandering tended to occur when the Alzheimer's patient was: out with the caregiver, agitated or argumentative, or left alone in the home. Other times someone wandered when the caregiver was asleep or distracted or had left for a normal outing but did not return. All of these situations occur normally with all Alzheimer's patients.

Recommendations for the caregiver

PREPARE BEFORE A WANDERING EVENT OCCURS

1. Register with Safe Return and keep contact information updated. Ensure the Safe Return jewelry is worn or clothes are tagged.
2. Use all your resources so that an Alzheimer's patient is not left in the home alone.
3. Inform your neighbors that your relative has Alzheimer's disease and if the person is seen alone in the neighborhood, the neighbor should escort him/her back home to a caregiver.
4. Prepare a search plan in case of wandering. Identify several other people who can help you search. Identify a person who can wait at the home for telephone calls or return of the

Alzheimer's patient. Frequently the Alzheimer's patient was found by a stranger, but the caregivers could not be contacted because they were out searching.

5. Don't rely on past behavior to predict what will happen next with regard to wandering. Even though someone has been safe when alone before, don't assume this will always be true.

CONDUCT A SEARCH IMMEDIATELY

1. Alzheimer's patients often cannot negotiate their own way home even from a short distance. Don't waste valuable time waiting for them to return.
2. Call your law enforcement agency first. When a missing person report was filed, the Alzheimer's patient was found by the police 50% of the time.
3. Enact your search plan:
 - Get help searching and assign a section of the neighborhood to each searcher
 - Search neighbors' front and backyards
 - Go into stores and other public buildings as you are searching
 - Search these areas starting at the home and extending out to 5 miles if necessary
 - Particularly if the search has not been successful after 6 hours or so, search any wooded areas or fields within a mile of the missing location. Pay particular attention to thickly wooded areas that are close to the sidewalk or street. You will need a shoulder-to-shoulder search of thickly wooded areas. It seems that the Alzheimer's patient rarely responds to verbal calls when they have hidden in natural areas. Thus you must literally come directly upon them to find them in these areas.

For further information contact:

Researcher: Meredith Rowe, RN, PhD, University of Florida, College of Nursing/Institute on Aging, 352-846-0678 or mrowe@nursing.ufl.edu