

Travel Safety

Having dementia does not mean that it's necessary to stop participating in meaningful activities such as travel; it just requires planning to ensure safety, comfort and enjoyment for everyone.

Whether taking a short trip to see friends and family or traveling a far distance for vacation, it's important to weigh the costs and benefits of travel for a person with dementia, based on needs, abilities and preferences. If travel is not appropriate, talk to family and friends about scheduling another time for them to visit the person.

General travel guidelines

- Changes in environment can trigger wandering. Be sure to enroll in MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®, a 24-hour nationwide emergency response service for individuals with dementia that wander or who have a medical emergency. The enrollment phone number is 1.888.572.8566. Those already enrolled should notify MedicAlert + Safe Return of travel plans.
- Stick with the familiar. Travel to known destinations that involve as few changes in daily routine as possible. Try to visit places that were familiar before the onset of dementia.
- Evaluate options for the best mode of travel. Based on needs, abilities, safety and preferences, decide what would provide the most comfort and the least anxiety.
- Avoid planning a trip where emergency health services and pharmacies to refill prescriptions are not easily accessible.
- Keep travel simple and manageable: Plan a short trip and avoid multiple stops.
- Avoid elaborate sightseeing trips or complicated tours, which may cause anxiety and confusion.
- If you will be staying in a hotel, inform the staff ahead of time of your specific needs so they can be prepared to assist you.
- Have a backup plan in case your trip needs to change unexpectedly. This may mean purchasing traveler's insurance if you have booked flights or hotels.
- Create an itinerary that includes details about each destination. Give copies to family members or friends you will be visiting, or to emergency contacts at home. Keep a copy of your itinerary with you at all times.
- Travel during the time of day that is best. For example, if the late afternoon increases agitation, avoid traveling at this time.
- Have a bag of essentials with you at all times that includes medications, your travel itinerary, a comfortable change of clothes, water, snacks and activities.
- Remember to pack necessary medications, up-to-date medical information, a list of emergency contacts and photocopies of important legal documents.
- Allow plenty of time for rest. Don't over-schedule.
- Learn if there are services available at your destination by contacting your local Alzheimer's Association.
- If traveling involves too many risks for the person with dementia, call the Alzheimer's Association to help you find an alternative plan that allows the person to remain at home.

Visiting with family or friends

Be sure to prepare friends or family members for the visit by explaining dementia and the changes it may have caused. Go over any special needs, and explain that the visit may be short or that you may need to change activities on short notice.

Some additional considerations:

- Request in advance any necessary preparations, such as having certain foods in the refrigerator and bedroom space set up. If it would be helpful, ask your hosts to label important areas, like the bathroom and bedroom, with signs.
- Stay as close to normal routine as possible. For example, bathing and eating times should be on a similar schedule to what they are at home. Eating in familiar settings, such as a dining room table, may be less confusing than eating at a crowded restaurant.
- Be realistic about abilities and limitations. Allow for extra time when scheduling activities.

Special considerations for air travel

Airports are full of things that will require attention. At times, so much activity can be distracting, overwhelming or difficult to understand.

Here are a few things to keep in mind if you're traveling by plane:

- Avoid scheduling flights that require tight connections. Ask about airport escort services that can help you get from place to place.
- Inform the airline and airport medical service department ahead of time of your specific needs to ensure they can be prepared to assist you. When requesting assistance, most airlines ask for at least 48 hours advance notice.
- Do not hesitate to remind airport employees and in-flight crew members of your needs.
- Even if walking is not difficult, consider requesting a wheelchair so that an airport employee is assigned to help you get from place to place in the airport.

If you're traveling with someone who has dementia

It's important to remember several things to ensure a positive, calm traveling experience:

- Avoid very loud restaurants and places with a lot of people if the person is overly tired.
- Learn to recognize warning signs of anxiety and agitation.
- Do not move too quickly or appear too hurried.
- Do not overload the person with many directions or too much information.
- If behavior becomes difficult, do not attempt physical restraint or to lead the person away. It may be better to step away or out of reach and monitor the person or call for help.
- Don't take it personally. Speak calmly and do not become drawn into an argument.

The Alzheimer's Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer care, support and research.

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