When a loved one wanders: practical steps for dementia care

Understanding wandering and why it happens

Wandering is one of the most concerning behaviours in dementia care. It can happen at any stage, though it becomes more common as memory loss and confusion deepen. A person may set off with a clear intention in their own mind, to go to work, to visit a childhood home, or simply to "go home", even when they are already at home. The urge is rarely aimless. It often stems from a genuine need or a feeling of displacement.

Knowing this does not make the worry any lighter. A person who wanders may become disoriented quickly, unable to ask for help or remember their address. They may walk for hours without rest, in any weather. For families, the fear of a loved one going missing is real and draining. The good news is that there are practical ways to reduce the risk while respecting the person's dignity and independence. One approach that many families now consider is wearable protection for wandering, which combines location tracking with a simple alert system.

Recognising the signs that wandering may start

Wandering does not usually appear without warning. Many people show patterns beforehand. They may pace around the house, appear restless, or talk about needing to leave. They might pack a bag or put on their coat at odd hours. Some become fixated on a past routine, such as catching a bus that no longer runs. Noticing these early cues gives you a chance to redirect the person or to put a plan in place before they leave the house.

It also helps to understand what triggers the behaviour. Common triggers include boredom, anxiety, hunger, thirst, pain, or the need to use the toilet. A person who is overstimulated by noise or activity may walk away to find quiet. Others wander because they are looking for something familiar. By addressing the underlying cause, offering a snack, a warm drink, or a quiet space, you can sometimes settle the restlessness without any argument.

Creating a safe home environment

Simple changes around the home can make a big difference. Start with the exits. If the person tends to leave through the front door, consider a lock that is unfamiliar to them, such as a slide bolt placed high or low, out of their usual line of sight. Camouflaging the door, painting it the same colour as the wall, or covering it with a curtain, can reduce the visual cue that says "exit." Some families use a discreet door alarm that sounds when the door opens, alerting a caregiver without startling the person.



Inside, keep walkways clear and well lit. A person who is confused may trip over clutter or become more disoriented in dim light. Place familiar objects around the house, such as family photos or a favourite chair, to reinforce the sense that this is home. If the person wakes at night and tries to leave, a motion-activated nightlight in the hallway can help them orient themselves.

Outside, think about the garden or yard. A secure fence with a self-latching gate can prevent someone from wandering onto the road. Remove trip hazards like loose stones or garden tools. If the person enjoys being outdoors, create a safe walking path in the garden, a loop around the lawn or a paved circuit, so they can walk without leaving the property.

Building a missing person plan before you need one

No matter how careful you are, there is always a chance that a person with dementia will wander out of sight. Having a plan ready reduces panic and speeds up the response. Write down the person's recent photo, a physical description, any medical conditions, and the places they might head toward, a former workplace, a park, a relative's house. Keep this information near the phone and share it with neighbours.

Tell neighbours about the wandering risk and ask them to call you if they see the person leaving alone. A local network of eyes can make all the difference. Some families also register with a community support program or a dementia-specific alert service that can notify volunteers in the area if someone goes missing.

Technology can play a useful role here. A dementia GPS tracker worn on the wrist or clipped to clothing lets a caregiver see the person's location in real time. Many of these devices also let you set a geofence, a virtual boundary around the home. If the person crosses that boundary, the device sends a mobile alert to your phone. This gives you time to act before the person has travelled far. For families who want an extra layer of reassurance, this kind of wearable protection for wandering is becoming a common part of the care plan.

Choosing the right kind of tracking device

Not all GPS trackers are the same. Some rely on a mobile network and need a SIM card and a monthly subscription. Others use a combination of GPS and Wi-Fi to improve accuracy indoors. The best device for your situation depends on where the person lives, urban or rural, and how far they tend to walk.



Look for a device that is comfortable to wear. If the person finds it bulky or irritating, they may take it off and leave it behind. A lightweight band that looks like a watch is often better accepted than a pendant or a clip-on unit. Battery life matters too. A device that needs charging every day can be a burden, whereas one that lasts several days on a charge is easier to maintain.

Some trackers include an SOS button that the person can press if they feel lost or scared. Others have fall detection, which automatically sends an alert if the device senses a hard fall. These features add a layer of safety beyond simple location tracking. The key is to choose something that fits the person's habits and your own capacity to monitor it.

Responding calmly when wandering happens

If the person does leave and you cannot find them quickly, stay calm. Check the places they are most likely to go first, the garden, the neighbour's house, the corner shop. Call their name in a friendly tone; a panicked voice can make them hide or walk faster. If you have a GPS tracker, open the app and check their location immediately.

If you cannot find them within a few minutes, call the police. Tell them the person has dementia and is wandering. Give them the photo and description you prepared. Do not wait hours to report someone missing. The sooner the search starts, the safer the outcome.

After the person is found, avoid scolding or lecturing. They did not wander on purpose. Reassure them and help them settle back into a familiar activity. Use the experience to review your plan. Was there a trigger you missed? Does the door need a different lock? Should the geofence be adjusted? Each incident teaches you something that can make the next one less likely.

Balancing safety with freedom

The hardest part of dementia care is finding the middle ground between keeping someone safe and letting them live as normally as possible. Wandering is not something you can stop entirely, nor should you try to. Walking is a natural human need, and for many people with dementia it is one of the few activities that still feels familiar and comforting.



The goal is not to confine but to guide. A safe walking area, a watchful neighbour, and a simple tracking device can give the person room to move while giving you peace of mind. It is a practical balance, and it works best when everyone involved, family, neighbours, and professionals, works together.

There is no single answer that fits every family. But with a good understanding of the behaviour, a safe home environment, and the right tools, the fear of wandering can become manageable. You do not have to watch every step. You just need to know where the path leads.