

## **When is my family member with dementia no longer safe alone?**

There is no easy answer to this question. Every person with dementia and every family is unique. For example, the progression of the disease, how the person responds to it, and the environment the person lives in are factors that can impact safety. Everyone has different levels of risk acceptance, that is, how comfortable we are with taking risks. Within a family there can be very different ideas about what is an acceptable level of risk.

A careful review of possible risks can help you in your decision process. Here is a list of things to consider as you make decisions about the safety of your family member.

- **Smoking.** Does your family member smoke? If so, do they leave burning cigarettes unattended? This can happen when someone has memory loss. If the person has a progressive dementia such as Alzheimer's dementia, this can become a dangerous problem. Sometimes the person forgets about smoking altogether. Working on ways to cut back or quit smoking will become important.
- **Leaving the stove on.** This can become dangerous when people are burning pots and pans on a regular basis. There are straightforward ways to handle this, such as :
  - Using an electric tea kettle that shuts off automatically
  - Disabling the stove by removing knobs or turning off circuits
  - Having an electrician install automatic shut-off timers on stoves and ovens.

- **Not responding to emergencies.** Would your family member know what to do in an emergency? You may want to ask a question like “what would you do if there was a fire?” However, even if the person can answer this question correctly, they may not actually be able to do what is needed. It’s important to ask them to show you how they would call 911, leave the house and go to the neighbor’s, etc.
- **Getting lost.** Does your family member leave the house alone? Go for walks? The National Alzheimer’s Association estimates that about 60 out of 100 (60%) of people with Alzheimer’s dementia will “wander” at some point. This means they get lost, often in a well-known place. If your family member is going out alone, you may wish to use a safety system such as the Safe Return program through the Alzheimer’s Association (1-800-272-3900; [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)). Safe Return is a medic-alert bracelet with a personal ID number and a 1-800 number on it, which is linked to a database of emergency contact numbers. There are also GPS-based devices, such as Comfort Zone, which is endorsed by the Alzheimer’s Association.
- **Leaving the house at night.** Some people with dementia get days and nights mixed up and may get up and get dressed in the middle of the night. If this is becoming a problem, or if the person has ever left the house in the middle of the night, then it becomes important to think about supervision at night. If other people are in the house, it may mean securing the doors, either with an alarm system or with simple door securing devices designed for children (try the Toys-R-Us childproofing section). If the person has ever left the house during the night, they are probably not safe alone at night.
- **Opening the door to strangers.** What does your family member do if someone rings the doorbell? Do they open the door to strangers? People with dementia slowly lose the ability to make safe, good decisions. This can

become very dangerous if the person is likely to answer the door and invite a stranger in or give the person money.

- **Giving money away.** Mail, phone, and computer solicitations make life dangerous for people with poor judgment. People with dementia are at high risk for being taken advantage of financially. This can happen with strangers or relatives. Financial problems can result from giving donations repeatedly or repeated credit card purchases.
  - If mail is the issue, one approach is to get a PO Box and have someone else in the family monitor it.
  - Phones can be changed to unlisted numbers.
  - Computers may be more difficult to monitor if your family member is able to use a computer.
  - It may become important to limit access to money or to leave only a small amount in a checking account for the person to use.
  
- **Falling often.** If your family member is falling often, they might not be safe alone.. In the early stages of dementia, they may be able to use a cell phone or a lifeline system to call for help, but as the disease progresses it is likely that they will not be able to remember to use it.
  
- **Trying former hobbies.** Some hobbies, like hunting, woodworking, cooking, and mowing the lawn, may involve machines that can be very dangerous.
  - Closely watching the person's ability to handle equipment safely becomes very important.
  - Guns and ammunition should be stored in locked containers. Sometimes it becomes important to remove tools or appliances from the person's home or to keep them under lock and key.

- **Handling alcohol, medications, and household toxins.** It is very important to monitor both alcohol and medications.
  - You may want to ask your family member's doctor about the amount of alcohol that is safe to consume.
  - If medications are simple, your family member may be able to manage them safely for a while. Some families gradually take over giving medications; others use alarmed dispensers. At some point locking up medications may be important to stop a person with memory loss from accidentally taking too much medicine.
  - Pay attention to household cleaners that may be used in the wrong way.
- **Calling frequently or exhibiting a lot of anxiety.** If your family member calls a lot, this is probably a sign that they are feeling anxious and are looking for support. This may be a good time to think about increased supervision or a companion. It is not surprising that people with memory loss feel anxious. They often forget important pieces of information that help them understand what they are supposed to be doing. That kind of anxiety may lead to safety risks, such as leaving the house or inviting strangers in because they are looking for reassurance.
- **Living Alone.** When should a person with dementia no longer live alone? Again, there are no easy answers. Your family member may be safe for short periods of time alone, but not for 24 hours, 7 days a week. Often families start by arranging help in the home part-time through companions or housekeepers. Sometimes families arrange for their family member to spend nights at a relative's house. Most people try a blend of approaches such as home care, adult day programs, and regularly scheduled time with family and friends. Paying attention to the signs listed above can help you determine when your family member may no longer be safe alone.

## Where can I learn more?

Good resource on home safety:

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/Publications/homesafety.htm>

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