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AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE

**MISSING**  
PERSONS

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# National Missing Persons Coordination Centre



## MISSING PERSONS AND DEMENTIA: WANDERING

## FACT SHEET

### Wandering is common among people with dementia and can lead to them going missing

**Carers of people with dementia may at some point be faced with the problem of what to do if the person begins to wander.**

Wandering is quite common among people with dementia and can be very distressing for them and those concerned for their safety. The person's failing memory and declining ability to communicate may make it impossible for them to explain why they wandered, how to get home, or how to make contact with their carers.

The greatest risk associated with wandering is that the person with dementia leaves the safety of their home unaccompanied and gets lost, becoming a missing person.

### REASONS FOR WANDERING

#### CHANGED ENVIRONMENT

A person with dementia may feel uncertain and disoriented in a new environment such as a new house or residential facility. The person may also want to escape from a noisy or busy environment.

#### LOSS OF MEMORY

Wandering may be due to a loss of short-term memory. A person may set off to go to the shop or a friend's house, and then forget where they were going or why.

#### SEARCHING FOR THE PAST

As people become more confused, they may wander off in search of someone, or something relating to their past. This may be a partner who has died or a house they lived in as a child.

#### EXCESS ENERGY

Wandering can be a way of using up excess energy, which may indicate that the person needs more regular exercise.

#### EXPRESSING BOREDOM

As dementia progresses people find it harder to concentrate for any length of time. Wandering may be their way of keeping occupied.

#### CONFUSING NIGHT WITH DAY

People with dementia may suffer from insomnia, or wake in the early hours and become disoriented. They may think it is daytime and decide to go for a walk.

#### CONTINUING A HABIT

People who have been used to walking long distances may simply wish to continue doing so.

#### AGITATION

Agitation can cause some people to pace up and down or to wander off with no apparent purpose. They may fail to recognise their own home and insist on leaving.

#### DISCOMFORT OR PAIN

Walking may ease discomfort, so it is important to find out if there is any physical problem or medical condition and try to deal with it. Tight clothing, excessive heat or needing to find a toilet can all cause problems.

#### A JOB TO PERFORM

Sometimes people leave the house because they believe they have a job to do, or are confused about the time of day, or the season.

#### DREAMS

An inability to differentiate dreams from reality may cause the person to respond to something that they dreamed, thinking that this has happened in real life.



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## IF A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA GOES MISSING...

- Stay calm and make a thorough search of the house, surrounding areas and/or aged care facility. Notify your neighbours, family and/or carers.
- Walk or drive around the block and immediate area and to any place the person may regularly visit. If possible, have somebody stay at home in case the person returns or to answer the phone.
- Notify the local police and file a missing person's report (reports over the phone are only accepted in South Australia). Advise the police that the person has dementia and of any concerns for their safety. It is

important to provide police with the following information:

- a physical description of the missing person including distinguishable features
- a description of what the person was wearing
- a recent photograph of the missing person
- where and when the person was last seen or heard
- places the person may visit
- a list of any medical problems or medications the person may need
- names and contact details of family members and friends.

## WHEN THE MISSING PERSON RETURNS HOME...

- Immediately notify family and/or their aged care facility and the police (if the missing person has not been located by them).
- Do not scold or show anxiety no matter how worried or inconvenienced you may have been. They may have been confused and frightened themselves.
- Provide reassurance and get back to a regular routine as quickly as possible.

*Dementia content provided by Dementia Australia.*

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### NATIONAL MISSING PERSONS COORDINATION CENTRE

The NMPCC, Australian Federal Police, provides a national leadership and coordination approach to the Australian Government's response to missing persons. Its mission is to reduce the incidence and impact of missing persons.

The NMPCC works within the PLEASE policy principles of Prevention, Location, Education, Awareness, Support and Evaluation.

Find out more by visiting our website.

[www.missingpersons.gov.au](http://www.missingpersons.gov.au)

### DEMENIA AUSTRALIA

Dementia Australia is the unified, national peak body for people, of all ages, living with all forms of dementia, their families and carers. It provides a voice for people impacted by dementia.

National Dementia Helpline:  
1800 100 500

[www.dementia.org.au](http://www.dementia.org.au)

**missingpersons.gov.au**  
**FREECALL 1800 000 634**