

Resources for Families

Safety When Your Loved One has Dementia



Seniors with Dementia

The home environment can play an important role in maintaining the health and cognitive abilities of your loved one. There are memory triggers in the home that won't be present in a different environment. For this reason, if it is possible, it is wonderful to keep a loved one at home as long as it is safe.

Making Changes

Since dementia is progressive, there may be things your loved one is able to manage now, but you may want to take preemptive measures to ensure their safety. When making changes, try to keep everything familiar. It is also important for your loved one to maintain some independence as long as they can do so safely. Err on the side of caution, but your loved one should still be able to do some things for themselves. This will boost their confidence and self-esteem. Striking a balance between safety and independence requires that you frequently re-assess their abilities, strength, judgment, balance, coordination, and ability to sit, stand, and walk.

In addition to the suggestions in Qualicare's book *Keeping Seniors Safe at Home*, you will want to do the following throughout the house.

- Mark glass furniture, doors, and windows with painter's tape or stickers so that they are easily noticed
- Use childproofing latches on cupboards to prevent your loved one from accessing dangerous appliances or cleaning products in rooms such as the kitchen, bathroom, and laundry room
- Put appliances out of sight if they are not needed regularly or may pose a danger if your loved one tries to use them
- Keep plastic bags out of reach as they pose a suffocation hazard
- Remove locks on interior doors to prevent your loved one from locking themselves in
- Cover sharp corners on furniture and the faucet in the bathtub with padding to avoid bumps and cuts
- Cover unused electrical outlets with childproof plugs
- Keep medications out of sight
- If you have one, consider disconnecting the garbage disposal



Food

Eating is an important part of our everyday. It helps us maintain our health, and cooking and eating can also be an enjoyable part of life. As judgment becomes impaired by dementia, food and eating can pose some dangers. Check the pantry and fridge for expired food on a regular basis. If there are pets in the home, limit their mealtimes and put their dishes out of sight when not in use. Remove any houseplants that are toxic if eaten. Put artificial fruits and vegetables or other decorative representations of food out of sight.

Heat Sources

Be cautious about sources of heat. Do not leave a loved one in a room with a fire burning in the fireplace. Lower the temperature of the hot water heater to prevent burns. Remove space heaters and, if possible, heating pads or electric blankets from their room. If you worry about your loved one in the kitchen, you may want to install an automatic shut-off range.

During the Night

Everyone needs to get a good rest so try to prepare before bedtime. Ensure your loved one has everything they need so that they are less likely to get up alone in the dark. Encourage them to drink some water, eat a snack, and use the restroom. It may also be a good idea to install a baby monitor in their room so that you can hear them if they need your help in the night. Ensure that exterior doors are locked.

Outside the Home

An effective way to protect seniors who have a tendency to wander is to install a fence around the yard and ensure the gate has a latch. If you have a swimming pool, this should be fenced separately with a locked gate. You may also want to get a pool cover that can lock in place and withstand the weight of a person. For above-ground pools, it is imperative that you have a properly installed pull-up ladder that can lock in place.

You can help cue your loved one to where they are by placing familiar objects, such as flower planters or decorative objects, by the entrance to the home. You may also want to



get a GPS tracker—modern ones are discrete and can be worn as a necklace or watch. To help protect your loved one, it is a good idea to let neighbors know about their condition so that they can keep an eye out as well.

Any vehicles or bicycles should be kept locked. Ensure that the barbecue is inaccessible when not in use. It may be helpful to place a “No Solicitation” sign at your door so that strangers, who could confuse or exploit your loved one, do not come to the door. Consider hiding a key outside your home in case your loved one accidentally locks you out.

Technology

If your loved one is able to use devices such as computers, tablets, or phones, monitor their use. Seniors with dementia are at significant risk of being exploited. If possible, keep computers belonging to others out of the way. Protect devices and documents with passwords. Lower or mute ringer and notification sounds so that they do not confuse or distract your loved one.

Tobacco and Alcohol

Smoking or drinking, whether in socially appropriate amounts or in excess, may be part of lifelong habits that are difficult to change. At any point in life, these can interfere negatively with medications and medical conditions. If these are part of your loved one’s life, it is imperative that you monitor any continued use carefully. You may need to hide matches and lighters as they pose a significant fire risk.



Confusion

Dementia impacts a person's perception and insight. They may find visual elements in their environment confusing. Ensure that lighting eliminates shadows as much as possible. Photographs or mirrors may cause confusion. Give careful consideration to pictures of family and friends—these can serve as positive memory triggers, but there may come a point when they create, rather than relieve, uncertainty.

A Whiteboard

For individuals in the early stages of dementia, a whiteboard may make their lives much easier. A recent study found that this simple tool placed in a key location helped reduce anxiety and increase confidence. The boards can be used for written reminders of various things, including appointments and tasks.

If it is feasible to keep your loved one with dementia at home instead of moving to a facility, this can be tremendously beneficial in terms of preserving their memory and preventing challenges that result from moving to an unfamiliar setting. If you need assistance ensuring that every possible safety measure is in place, contact Qualicare.

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