There are times when most people want to walk about. People with dementia are no different. Walking is not a problem in itself – it can help to relieve stress and boredom and is good exercise. But as with all behaviour, if a person with dementia is walking about – and possibly leaving their home – it could be a sign that they have an unmet need. By understanding what they need and looking for solutions, you can help to improve their wellbeing.

This factsheet explains why a person with dementia may walk about. It also suggests how you can help the person to walk safely, and how to manage the risks.
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Walking about

It can be worrying if you are supporting a person with dementia who often walks about. They may walk repeatedly around the house or leave the house at any time of day or night. People with dementia often have problems with orientation and memory, which may make it hard for them to find their way home. This can cause you to worry about their safety.

You might not understand why the person you are caring for is walking about. This is why it is often referred to as ‘wandering’. This term is unhelpful because it suggests that the person is walking without purpose, whereas they will often have a reason for it. Rather than dismissing the person’s behaviour, it’s important to think about why they might be walking about and how you can help them maintain their independence, safety and dignity.

Why might someone walk about?

A person with dementia might walk about for a number of reasons. The reasons may not be obvious – when you ask them, the person may not remember or be able to tell you. However if you try to understand why the person is walking about and what they need, this can help you find ways to meet their needs.

Try keeping a journal for a couple of weeks, including notes about the person’s behaviour and any reasons they give for why they are walking about. This might help you to identify why they are walking about.
Memory loss
A person with dementia might begin a journey with a particular goal in mind and then, due to short-term memory loss, forget where they were going and become lost. Similarly, they might be searching for an item that they have misplaced or think that someone else has taken. You can try to prevent this by keeping some of their favourite personal items where they can see them.

Confusion about the time
People with dementia often become confused about the time. They may wake up in the middle of the night and get dressed, ready to start the day. This confusion is easy to understand, especially in winter when it is common to go to sleep, and wake up, when it’s dark.

It can help if you place a large clock that shows am and pm by the person’s bedside. Some clocks also show the day of the week and the date – see factsheet 437, Using technology to help with everyday life.

If the person you are caring for walks about a lot during the night, this may be because they are having difficulty sleeping. This is common in older people and is particularly common in people with dementia. You can do simple things to try to help them sleep – encourage them to avoid having daytime naps and to avoid caffeinated drinks such as tea, coffee or energy drinks, especially in the evening or late at night. They should also avoid drinking alcohol, smoking, or eating a large meal near bedtime. Doing exercise and some complementary therapies may also help them to sleep – see factsheet 529, Physical activity and exercise.

Relieving pain and discomfort
People often walk about when they are in pain because they are trying to ease their discomfort. Alternatively, a person may walk about to try and ‘escape’ from their pain. The cause of a person’s pain will not always be obvious – for example if they have toothache. If you think the person is walking about because they are in pain, ask them and talk to their GP or dentist.
A person with dementia may also walk about more when they are feeling unwell – see ‘Restlessness, agitation and anxiety’ below. If you notice a sudden change in the person’s habits and restlessness – for example if they become less able than usual to focus or to be still – ask whether they feel unwell. You can also ask their GP to examine them for any physical illnesses.

It might be that the person you are caring for is walking about because they are uncomfortable. They might need the toilet or be constipated, or they may be wearing ill-fitting shoes, clothing or dentures. Similarly, they may be responding to an uncomfortable environment – it may be too hot or too cold, or there may be poor lighting or bad smells. People with dementia can also find it difficult to cope with a lot of noise – simple things like closing a door when you are vacuuming can help. It often takes trying different things to work out what the cause might be.

**Restlessness, agitation and anxiety**

People who walk about may also feel agitated, fidget, tap their fingers or make other repetitive movements. These behaviours are known as ‘restlessness’. They may be a symptom of the physical changes in the brain caused by dementia. For more information see factsheet 525, *Changes in behaviour*.

A person may feel the need to walk about as a side-effect of certain medication (such as some antipsychotic medications). If you think this is the case, ask the person’s GP to check whether their prescription could be causing them to feel restless.

There is also a medical condition called ‘restless leg syndrome’ that gives people an overwhelming, irresistible urge to move their legs to stop unpleasant sensations – mostly at night. This condition causes people to get up and walk about during the night. If you think the person you are supporting might have restless leg syndrome, talk to their GP.
Some people may walk about because they feel anxious. A number of things can cause anxiety. For example a person with dementia might be more aware of the changes they are experiencing or because they are unable to continue with hobbies and tasks they enjoy. A less common reason is that they may be responding to issues with their visual perception or hallucinations and how they interpret what they see. This is a more common symptom of certain types of dementia, such as dementia with Lewy bodies – see factsheet 527, *Sight, perception and hallucinations in dementia*. Try to reassure the person you are caring for and encourage them to tell you why they feel anxious – see factsheet 500, *Communicating* for tips and advice.

As with the information on relieving pain and discomfort mentioned above, you may need to go through a process of trial and error to work out why the person you are caring for is restless, agitated or anxious. It can be useful if you start by checking for any physical causes – make sure they are wearing comfortable shoes and clothing, and try adjusting the heating to change the temperature.

_A person may feel the need to walk about as a side-effect of certain medication (such as some antipsychotic medications). If you think this is the case, ask the person’s GP to check whether their prescription could be causing them to feel restless._

**Relieving boredom**

The person you are caring for may walk about because they don’t have enough things to do. They may feel bored because they don’t do as much as they used to – for example, seeing friends or going out. Having things to do gives everyone a sense of purpose and self-worth, and people with dementia are no exception. Try to find ways to help the person stay mentally engaged and physically active. For example, encourage them to play games or to take part in hobbies. You could also try to involve them in housework or daily tasks to help them stay active and engaged.
Lack of physical activity
If the person you are caring for constantly walks about, it may be because they have energy to spare. They may feel the need to do more regular exercise. If they are able, it could help if they take part in exercise classes or activities such as walking groups. You can also help them to include more exercise in their daily routine without making big lifestyle changes. Good examples include:

- doing seated exercises – see factsheet 529, Physical activity and exercise for examples
- walking to the shops
- walking up steps
- doing some gardening or brisk housework.

If they are able, it could be helpful if the person accompanies someone to leave the house at least once a day to get some fresh air. If they see regular routines such as the rubbish being collected, post being delivered or children going to school, it can also help to orientate them.

For more information see factsheet 529, Physical activity and exercise.

Continuing a habit or interest
As much as possible, people with dementia will often want to continue with habits or interests they had before their diagnosis. Walking is one example of this. You may find that the person you are caring for wants to walk about at times of the day when they used to be out and about – for example, when they would have gone to work, walked the dog or collected their children from school. Try to support their need to walk for as long as you can, although if they are mistaken about why they need to walk try not to reinforce their incorrect belief.

If you can’t accompany them, you could ask family or friends if they can help.

In some areas there are dementia-friendly walking groups. These groups help people with dementia to continue walking in a safe environment with other people. For more information see ‘Helping someone to walk about safely’ on page 10 and ‘Other useful organisations’ on page 15.
Staying independent
If you are caring for someone with dementia, it is very important to encourage them to stay independent for as long as possible. However, you may be worried about the person being at risk of harm or injury.

In daily life, there will always be some degree of risk. You and any other people involved in the person’s care need to decide what level of risk is acceptable in order to maintain their quality of life and protect their independence and dignity. Remember that if the person has capacity (the ability to make decisions) then they can decide to do things even if they put themselves at risk. If the person does not have capacity, they should still be involved in discussions about their care as much as possible, and all decisions must be made in their best interests. For more information on capacity see factsheet 460, Mental Capacity Act 2005.

The steps you take to look after the person will depend on how well they are able to cope and the reasons why they are walking about. You should also think about whether their environment is safe and whether any safeguards need to be put in place. There is no such thing as a risk-free environment, but some places are safer than others. For example, does the person:

- live on a busy main road or in an urban area where people don’t know their neighbours, or
- live in a quiet rural area where they are well known within the local community?

Looking at the person’s environment can help you to see whether you can reduce any risks – see ‘Limiting the risk: tips for carers’ on page 12.

Searching for a person or something from the past
If the person is on their own, sometimes even for short periods, they may walk about to try to look for a specific person. This may make them feel extremely anxious. If you are caring for a person with dementia, it can help if you write notes when you’re going out to remind them about where you
are and when you will return. Try to put the notes where they will stay in place and where the person will see them, such as near the kettle or on the inside of the front door. You may find it helpful to write key information on a whiteboard.

As dementia progresses, the person you are caring for may try to find someone or something from their past. For example, they may not remember that someone has moved or died. Encourage them to talk about this so you can try to understand who or what they are searching for. Show them that you are listening and taking their feelings seriously. Try to avoid ‘correcting’ what they say. It is much more important to focus on the person’s feelings rather than whether what they are saying is true. For example, if they are looking for their mother, ask them about her and show them some photographs. This may help to identify and meet their emotional needs and reduce their need to walk about.

Feeling lost

If a person with dementia is in unfamiliar surroundings, they might walk about because they feel lost. For example, when they move house, attend a new day centre or move into a care home. If the person’s living environment has changed, try showing them familiar items such as photographs or furniture. This can help to reassure them that they belong in the new place. It can also help if you match the layout of their new home with their previous one – using some of the same furniture, if possible. The person may need extra help from family, friends or care home staff to find their way around the new environment, but they may become less disorientated as the surroundings become more familiar to them.

As dementia progresses, the person you are caring for may begin to feel lost in their own home. For example, they may forget where the bathroom is and walk around to try to find it. Leaving the bathroom door open and the light on could help. See booklet 819, Making your home dementia friendly, for more useful information. You can download it from alzheimers.org.uk/dementiafriendlyhome or call 0300 303 5933 to order a copy.
What can I do?

If someone you are caring for often walks about, it can be difficult to know how to respond. It is important to remember that walking about may be a phase that the person is going through. Take the time to try to understand why they are walking about and what they need – this can often help to manage the situation.

Helping someone to walk about safely

If the person you are caring for wants to walk about, try to find a way for them to do so safely. For instance, you could try to find a local service, group or organisation that helps people with dementia take part in activities, including walking. Some organisations also specialise in structured leisure and wellbeing activities for people with dementia – for details see factsheet 529, Physical activity and exercise. Your local Alzheimer’s Society service may be able to help you find out about what is available in your area.

You may be able to get help through a care needs assessment (also called a community care assessment in Northern Ireland). This is the process that local authorities use to assess the care needs of a person with dementia – see factsheet 418, Assessment for care and support in England, factsheet W418, Assessment for care and support in Wales, or factsheet NI418, Community care assessment in Northern Ireland.

If the person wants to leave the house

If a person with dementia walks about, they may leave their home. This can be worrying for carers. It can be hard to know how to manage this situation and any risks, while maintaining the person’s independence.

If you want to encourage the person not to leave the house, try distracting them with an activity – even everyday tasks like folding clothes or laying the table. It can help if you suggest activities that involve moving around.

You can also try installing a door sensor that plays a pre-recorded message asking the person not to leave the house. It may also help if you switch off any outside lights at night to minimise what they can see through the windows.
You can also think about getting a specialist tracking device that uses GPS to locate where a person is. However you will need to get the person’s consent and think about whether a tracking device would be suitable for them. For more information see factsheet 437, Using technology to help with everyday life, and factsheet 484, Making decisions and managing difficult situations.

These options may not suit everyone, and it’s important to monitor the things you try to make sure they do not cause further confusion or distress for the person you are caring for.

Do not use medication, such as sleeping tablets, to prevent the person from getting up at night or walking about. Doses that are strong enough to stop someone from walking about can make them feel drowsy and, in some instances, cause them to fall. Medication can also increase their confusion, worsen memory problems and possibly cause incontinence.

Some carers may decide to lock a person with dementia in their home so that they cannot leave. However, a person with dementia should never be locked in if they are on their own as this can be very dangerous – for example if there is a fire, or if they have an accident or fall.

If there is someone else in the house with the person, you may want to lock the doors to stop the person going outside and putting themselves at risk. You might do this, for example, if they live near a busy road. You should discuss whether to lock the doors with any other people who are involved in the person’s care. Any decisions that you make should not place the person with dementia at any risk, and doors should be locked for the shortest time necessary. Be aware of any fire risks and ensure that the locks are easy for you or another carer to operate. If the person has capacity (the ability to make decisions) and consents to the doors being locked then you can lock them. If the person doesn’t have capacity you can lock the doors if it is in their best interests and is also the least restrictive option for keeping them safe. For more information about making decisions on behalf of someone else see factsheet 460, Mental Capacity Act 2005, and factsheet 484, Making decisions and managing difficult situations.
A person with dementia should never be locked in if they are on their own as this can be very dangerous – for example if there is a fire, or if they have an accident or fall.

Limiting the risk: tips for carers

- If the person’s home has a garden, you could look for ways to make it safe for them to walk around – for example by making sure there are no obstacles on the ground and that the grass is not overgrown. To make the experience more enjoyable, you could create a circular path with points of interest, such as birdfeeders and garden ornaments.

- Try to find out whether there are local volunteer schemes in your area that help people with dementia to return home if they walk about. For example Neighbourhood Return is a scheme that notifies local volunteers who can help to look for a person who has got lost. Contact your local council for more information about the scheme and to see whether it operates in your area.

- If the person you are caring for is determined to leave their home, try not to argue with them, as this could be upsetting. Instead try to find out where they want to go, and help them put on appropriate clothing if necessary (for example, outdoor shoes and a coat) and accompany them. You can then try to divert their attention so that you can both return home safely.

- Make sure the person carries some identification or the name and phone number of someone who can be contacted if they get lost. You could sew this information onto a jacket or handbag so that it is not easily removed. Or the person may find it useful to carry one of Alzheimer’s Society’s Helpcards to show other people. For more information go to alzheimers.org.uk/helpcards. You could also get them an identification bracelet, like those provided by MedicAlert – see ‘Other useful organisations’ below.
If the person uses a mobile phone, make sure some ‘in case of emergency’ (ICE) numbers are saved and easily accessible – for example the phone number of their primary carer. If the mobile phone is switched on, it may also be possible to trace the person if they go missing.

You can also think about getting the person a specialist tracking device that uses GPS to locate where they are. However, you will need to think about the relevant ethical questions such as getting the person’s consent – see page 11.

If you know and trust local shopkeepers and neighbours, consider sensitively telling them that the person has dementia and giving them your contact details. Ask them to call you if they see the person walking about. You should get the person’s consent to tell other people that they have dementia, if they are able to give it. If the person can’t give their consent, only disclose their diagnosis if you think it is in the person’s best interests.

If the person is in day care, respite residential care or long-term care, tell the staff about their tendency to walk about. You can also ask about the policy on safe walking and care for residents who are prone to walk about.
If the person disappears: tips for carers

- Try to stay calm.

- If you can’t find the person, tell the local police. Keep a recent photograph of the person to help the police identify them. Consider taking part in the Herbert Protocol – a national scheme that encourages carers to compile useful information that can be used if a vulnerable person later goes missing. The Herbert Protocol is used by about 70% of police services across England and Wales and an online version of the Protocol is being considered. You can find more information at www.met.police.uk/herbertprotocol or contact your local police.

- Think of places the person likes or has visited a lot in the past as they may have gone there. For example, they might have gone to places they previously lived or worked, or places where they have enjoyed spending time.

- Consider using social media to ask people in the local area to contact you if they see the person. You might find it useful to post to local area groups and missing persons groups. However, think very carefully about which groups you post to and how much information you decide to share online – for example, the person you are caring for may not want other people to know that they have dementia.

- When the person returns, try not to react angrily or criticise them. If they were lost, they may be feeling anxious. Reassure them, and get them back into a familiar routine.

- After the situation is resolved, try to give yourself time and space to relax. You may find it helpful to talk to a family member, a friend or a professional.
Looking after yourself: tips for carers
If you are caring for a person who often walks about, it is very important that you also look after your own wellbeing. Try to find ways to help you cope with the emotions you are feeling. For example, talking to friends and family members about any worries you have can be very helpful. Talk to them about how they can help and support you. See booklet 600, Caring for a person with dementia: A practical guide for more information and advice. You may find it useful to contact the Alzheimer’s Society Dementia Helpline for emotional support, advice and information. You can call the helpline on 0330 222 1122.

You can also connect and share stories with other people who are caring for a person who walks about. You might want to do this through Alzheimer’s Society’s online community, Dementia Talking Point (alzheimers.org.uk/talkingpoint). You can join discussions on walking about and share your own experiences. Talking Point is free and is available 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

Other useful organisations
MedicAlert
01908 951 045
info@medicalert.org.uk
www.medicalert.org.uk

MedicAlert provides an identification system for people who have hidden medical conditions and allergies. You can buy jewellery engraved with details about the person’s condition, an identification number and a 24-hour emergency phone number.

Walk4Life
www.walk4life.info

This website is part of the NHS Change4Life initiative. It offers information on local walks, events and walking groups.
Alzheimer’s Society Dementia Helpline
England, Wales and Northern Ireland:

0300 222 1122

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