



Safety Tips for those living with Alzheimer's



January is Alzheimer disease awareness month. Alzheimer's causes a number of changes in the brain and body that may affect safety. Depending on the stage of the disease, these can include:

- Judgment: forgetting how to use household appliances.
- Sense of time and place: getting lost in familiar places.
- Changes in behaviour: becoming easily confused, suspicious or fearful.
- Physical ability: having trouble with balance.
- Senses: experiencing changes in vision, hearing, and possible sensitivity to temperature or depth perception.

Alzheimer's progresses differently in each individual living with the disease. As caregivers, the following general principles may be helpful in adapting to the challenge of an individual's change in behaviour and functioning.

- **Think prevention:** Conducting a safety assessment of the home, may assist in providing a sense of control over problems that may create hazardous situations.
- **Adapt the environment:** It is more effective to change the environment than to change ones behaviours. While some behaviours may be managed with medications, many cannot. Making changes to an environment may decrease the hazards and stressors that accompany behavioural and functional changes.
- **Minimize hazards.** By minimizing hazards, the independence of the individual living with Alzheimer's can be maintained for a longer period of time. A safe environment can be a less restrictive where the person with Alzheimer's can experience increased security and greater mobility.

Safety throughout the House

A safe home can be a less stressful for the person with Alzheimer's, the caregiver, and family.

- Display emergency numbers and the home address near all telephones. Use an answering machine when unavailable to answer phone calls, set it to turn on after the fewest number of rings possible. A person with Alzheimer's may be unable to take messages or could become victim to telemarketing fraud.
- Install smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors in or near the kitchen and all sleeping areas. Test their functioning and replace batteries frequently.
- Simplify the environment by removing clutter or valuable items that could be misplaced, lost, or hidden. Keep all areas where people walk free of furniture and obstructions.
- Light sensors that turn lights on automatically when one approaches certain areas may be useful both for visibility and to alert caregivers of wandering behaviour.
- To prevent the person with Alzheimer's from opening the door to unwanted solicitors or potential criminals, consider installing a "NO SOLICITING" sign on the door. Use door alarms such as loose bells above the door or devices that ring when the doorknob is touched or the door is opened. Hide a spare house key outside in case the person with Alzheimer's locks you out of the house.
- Remove any locks from doors to spaces where the person with Alzheimer's may need to use (i.e. bathrooms, bedrooms) to prevent them from accidentally locking themselves inside. Install locks on doors to rooms the individual should not be in (i.e. other family members' bedrooms, pantry, garage).
- Install childproof door latches on storage cabinets and drawers in kitchens and bathrooms where valuables, breakable or dangerous household items and medications are stored. Install cushioned corner guards on corners and sharp edges to prevent injury should the person with Alzheimer's trip or fall.

Personal Safety

The cognitive impairments associated with Alzheimer's will amplify the personal safety needs of those living with Alzheimer's. In addition to general personal safety tips for older adults, consider the following:

- Visit the Alzheimer Society of BC www.alzheimer.ca/bc to learn about creating an Identification Kit for individuals at risk of getting lost. If the individual goes missing, caregivers will have immediate access to valuable information to assist the police in the search for their loved one.
- Obtain a medical identification bracelet for the person with Alzheimer's with the words "memory loss" inscribed along with an emergency telephone number. Place the bracelet on the person's dominant hand to limit the possibility of removal, or solder the bracelet closed. Visit the Alzheimer's Society of BC Association to learn more about the MedicAlert® Safely Home® program.
- While disasters and emergencies affect everyone, the impact on people with disabilities/special needs is often greater. It is important to have a plan in the event of a disaster or emergency, visit www.getprepared.gc.ca for the Emergency Preparedness Guide for People with Disabilities/Special Needs.