

## Keeping Our Loved Ones Safe

When we raised children, their safety was first and foremost. Later, when we are caring for a loved one with dementia, we may pay less attention to their safety because they are adults and they have had a lifetime of learning what is safe and what is not. But we must understand that dementia has eroded or erased the memories of what they have learned about being safe. In addition, dementia degrades all of one's senses and, over time, their physical abilities.

With this in mind, we must be proactive toward a loved one's safety. In my caregiver support groups, I often ask, "Do you put up a fence around your pool after your toddler has shown you he can fall in?" Of course not! Below are some of the problems for which we must "build a new fence."

**Tools and appliances:** Mechanical devices that we have learned to use without even thinking can harm a person who has forgotten how to use them. Saws, grinders, even blenders must be moved where they are no longer accessible.

**Detergents and solvents:** Each day we use dangerous chemicals because we have learned not to put them into our mouth or eyes. We use things that are harsh on our skin, but we know to wash them away immediately. Again, these must be locked away from your loved one with dementia.

Don't think they are out of harm's way because they are in the garage. A person with dementia can be extremely curious. Wherever you store them, detergents and solvents must be under lock and key. Or replace them entirely with soaps that are harmless and even edible. One of these is the "Method" brand.

**Food:** Dementia degrades our sense of smell. This is especially dangerous for individuals with dementia who live alone. If you have such friends or relatives, try to check in on them frequently and pay attention to the state of what is in their cabinets or refrigerator.

**Environmental Safety:** As dementia erodes our vision, dexterity, hearing, and sense of balance, our environment becomes less safe. Sharp corners or loose rugs that we once ignored become hazardous.

Let me suggest the Senior Resources/Aging in Place web site that provides guidelines for home assessment for safety. Go to [www.seniorresource.com/ageinpl.htm#assess](http://www.seniorresource.com/ageinpl.htm#assess).

**Driving:** Taking a loved one's car keys away is one of the toughest things you will ever do, but there may come a time when it is necessary. Try to reduce the trauma by providing their transportation or recruiting friends or family to pitch in. Finding a way to keep them active and social is important.

**Firearms:** It goes without saying that an individual living with dementia should no longer have access to firearms. They must be removed or made inoperable. There is no margin for error here.

**Wandering:** Six out of ten individuals living with dementia will wander away from home. Call 911 immediately. And in anticipation of this likely event, get a human scent preservation kit. These are the cheapest "life insurance" you will ever buy. They are available from the Alzheimer's Family Organization, along with other countermeasures against wandering and becoming lost. Call 352-616-0170 for more information.

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