

For those with dementia, routine plays a key role in mental and emotional well-being. Even minor changes in schedule and surroundings can cause fear and uncertainty, leading to challenging or dangerous behaviors. While non-essential travel is discouraged for individuals with mid- to late-stage dementia, the following precautions can help reduce the risk to your loved one's safety and mitigate common behavioral challenges during travel.

BEFORE TRAVEL: SHOULD YOU SHARE YOUR PLANS?

For some people with dementia, the idea of travel is exciting, while for others, it may create anxiety. In most cases, there's no need to inform your loved one in advance, so trust your personal judgment as to whether, when, and/or how to tell them. As their primary caregiver, you know best how your loved one is likely to respond and how you will handle their response.

PLANNING

Schedule travel around your loved one's "best" time of day – likely morning, following a good night's sleep.

Minimize the commute length, avoiding heavy traffic if driving, or making as few flight changes as possible if flying. If you must change planes, ensure adequate time during the layover to change gates.

IDENTIFICATION IS CRITICAL

Make sure your loved one is never without identification and your contact information. More than one kind of ID is best. Consider an ID bracelet, written information in their wallet or pocket and using a GPS tracker like an Apple AirTag, if possible.

PREPARING FRIENDS AND FAMILY

- Set realistic expectations for those you will spend time with.
- Inform them of your loved one's special needs and preferences.
- Share copies of "Welcome to Planet Alzheimer's" and the "Caregivers Ten Commandments," which are very easy, quick reads and offer excellent tips.
- Emphasize the need for calm, quiet environments and regularly scheduled breaks.
- Encourage dementia-friendly interactions with your loved one. (For example, introducing themselves before each interaction; approaching your loved one from the front, not the side or behind; avoiding open-ended questions and using easy one or two-option choices; speaking slowly and clearly; giving simple step-by-step instructions when necessary, etc.)

RESTROOMS

Try to use handicap or family restrooms, which can make travel stops easier and make a schedule for periodic stops along the way. Many newer state rest areas and large truck stops (Flying J, Travel Center of America, Wilco, Love's, etc.) offer family restrooms, and you can download apps like "Flush" or "Squat or Not" to find other good options.

WHILE IN TRANSIT

Carry a travel bag with the following and make sure you have easy access to it at all times:

- Your name and contact information, and that of one or more emergency contacts.
- A detailed travel itinerary. Include all scheduled legs of the trip, accommodations and local contacts if possible.
- A list of medical conditions and all medications for both you and your loved one.
- Copies of insurance cards and medical power of attorney for your loved one.
- Snacks, sanitizer/wipes, water, travel pillow, sweater/cardigan/blanket, noise-canceling headphones, pain reliever, and spare undergarments/change of clothes in case of an accident.
- Take extra care to ensure your loved one stays hydrated and is offered regular snacks and drinks.

IF FLYING...

- Notify the airline in advance and request a wheelchair from the time you arrive until you leave the airport. If your loved one won't use the chair, ask them to assist as you ride in it or they push a bag.)
- If driving, try to have your loved one ride in the back seat, with the child safety locks engaged to minimize the risk of opening the door at traffic lights. This happens far more than most realize!
- Offer frequent restroom breaks, taking advantage of family restrooms at airports or large travel centers en route.

PROJECT CALMNESS AND CONFIDENCE

Don't worry about what others may think of your loved one's actions. Instead, focus your energy on the atmosphere you are creating with your attitude and actions. Your loved one's behavior and mood will likely reflect yours. Allow yourself ample time, try to remain flexible, unruffled, upbeat, and do your best to project calmness and confidence. If needed, fake it until you make it!

DURING THE TRIP

- Look for non-verbal cues. New environments bring many distractions that can make it even more difficult for your loved one to express their needs and feelings. Changes in routine and unfamiliar faces can create uncertainty and fear, which may cause your loved one to withdraw, become irritable, cry, or exhibit other challenging behaviors.
- Each morning, take a full-length photo of your loved one in their outfit for the day.
- Wandering is a big risk in unfamiliar surroundings, and a current photo can be an invaluable asset when searching for someone who's lost.
- Stick to your regular sleep and meal schedules as much as possible.
- Schedule several breaks each day, allowing your loved one plenty of time to sleep or rest in a calm, relaxing environment.

(DURING THE TRIP, CONTINUED)

- Try to remain patient if your loved one is more attached/clingy than usual. For someone with dementia, their primary caregiver is an anchor – a source of safety and comfort – and that anchor is critical in an unfamiliar environment.
- Avoid situations that can become over-stimulating to someone with dementia. Crowded restaurants, noisy events, flashing lights, and other busy environments can cause extreme stress, leading to irritation that could show up as anger, crying, or elopement.
- Keep in mind the increased possibility of bowel problems due to changes in diet and routine. Discomfort from constipation is often difficult to verbalize and is often exhibited by irritability.
- At night, place a chair or heavy luggage in front of the door to keep your loved one from leaving the room unnoticed.
- Leave the bathroom light on or use a nightlight to help orient your loved one towards the restroom in the dark.

Remember, you are not alone! We want you to have **MORE.GOOD.DAYS**. Respite Care Charleston is available to support you when you need it. If you have questions about anything you have read here, please reach out to us at info@RespiteCareCharleston.org or call (843) 647-7405.