



# Disorientation and getting lost

A guide for people living with dementia

**Alzheimer***Society*  
BRITISH COLUMBIA

# Disorientation and dementia

Sometimes people living with dementia become disoriented, even in familiar places. This means you might become confused or find it hard to get home. This happens because of physical changes to the brain which are caused by Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia.



**Symptoms of dementia, like memory loss or changes in vision, can make familiar places look unfamiliar.**

## Why is this important?

There is a risk of becoming lost at any stage of the dementia journey. Even if you are not currently experiencing disorientation, you may want to learn more about this symptom and put some safety strategies in place.

**Here are some situations where a person living with dementia might become confused or lost:**

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Going for a walk – even when taking a familiar route.</li><li>• Driving – even when taking a familiar route.</li><li>• Going on a short errand and becoming disoriented.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Losing a sense of direction in a crowd of people.</li><li>• Being in a place where there is too much noise or stimulation, such as a mall or airport.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Taking a shortcut and then not knowing which way to go.</li><li>• Experiencing side-effects from medication.</li></ul> |
|--|---|--|

## Strategies to reduce the risk of getting lost

No one likes to think about getting lost. However, taking precautions and discussing these strategies with people who care about you, can help keep you safe now and in the future. Consider whether these tips suggested by people living with dementia might work for you.

<b>Get help from family and friends</b>	<p>"When my son and I walk together, we take the same route for the same amount of time. This way, if I go alone, the route is familiar and I'm more likely to find my way home. If I'm gone longer than usual, he knows to come looking for me."</p>
	<p>"I like to take walks by myself but sometimes my husband comes with me. He doesn't give any directions. He just goes along to make sure I still know where I'm going. I don't always like it, but I know he's right to be concerned."</p>
	<p>"I got to know the neighbours on my walking route and told them about my diagnosis so I can ask for directions or help if I feel lost. If I look confused, they know to come talk to me."</p>
<b>Use memory aids</b>	<p>"We taped our home phone number to the back of my cell phone so people know who to call if I need help."</p>
	<p>"I carry a small notebook to record reminders to myself about directions or where my car is parked."</p>
<b>Stay safe</b>	<p>"I don't go out of the house by myself in bad weather. When I'm too warm or too cold, I don't think clearly and I don't want to get lost."</p>

Write down your own strategies below:

## Identification

It is important to wear some form of identification at all times. Even if you don't think that you will get lost, it is a good idea to be prepared just in case. There are many options to choose from. You may want to talk with your family or friends to determine which type of identification would work best for you.

### MediAlert® Safely Home® program – a 24/7 identification service

- A nation-wide partnership emergency hotline service from MediAlert Foundation Canada and the Alzheimer Society of Canada.
- The ID bracelet bears the authentic MediAlert symbol recognized by emergency responders and is engraved with the wearer's critical medical information and the Emergency Hotline number.
- MediAlert's 24/7 Emergency Hotline relays key medical information to emergency responders within an average of five seconds.
- Financial assistance is available through the Membership Assistance Program.
- To learn more or to register call 1-855-581-3794 or visit [www.medicalert.ca/safelyhome](http://www.medicalert.ca/safelyhome).



### Customized identification

- Different types of identification may include:
  - Generic identification bracelets which can be purchased at some drugstores or jewelry stores and can be engraved by a jeweler.
  - A personal identification card which can be placed in a wallet or pocket.
  - Lanyard with identification card attached.
- Privacy and safety should be considered when deciding what information should be included on customized identification.
- A limitation of generic ID jewelry is that they are not connected with an emergency hotline service and may not be recognized by first responders.

### Identification kit

- An identification kit can help you organize important information about yourself.
- Fill out and print the identification kit on page 5.
- Keep the kit in a central location, like attached to the refrigerator door.
- Your caregiver can easily share the information with police to assist in a search if you become lost.
- Regularly check to ensure the information is current. For example, update the photo if your appearance changes.

# Identification kit

## Your details

First name:

Last name:

Nickname:

Date of birth:

Gender:

Language(s) spoken:

Cell phone:

Home address:

## Wandering history

Have you wandered before?    Yes    No

What are your favourite places to visit?

Where did you used to work?

What transit routes have you taken in the past?

## Recent photo

Place a recent, good quality photograph clearly showing your head and shoulders here. Replace the photo with an updated version as needed.

## Emergency contact person

Name:

Relation to you:

Home phone:

Cell phone:

Work phone:

Home address:

## Physical description

Height:            feet            inches  
                          metres            centimetres

Weight:           lbs or            kgs

Eye colour:

Hair colour:

Hair style:

Ethnicity:

Complexion:

## Identifying features

Check all that apply:

Hearing aid(s):		Visual aid(s):	
Left	Right	Glasses	Contacts
Dentures:		Walking aid:	
Upper	Lower	Cane	Walker
Wheelchair			
<p>Other (scars, birthmarks, tattoos).          Location and description:</p>			

## Medical information

Medical condition(s):

Allergies:

Current medication(s):

Doctor's name:

Doctor's phone number: (            )

## Personal identification & locating devices

Are you registered with MedicAlert® Safely Home®?            Yes            No

Do you wear a MedicAlert® bracelet or another form of identification? Describe what it looks like. Is it a bracelet or necklace? What colour is it?

Do you have a locating device? Note the type and model and describe what it looks like.

## Do you have access to a vehicle?

License plate number:

Vehicle colour:

Vehicle brand and model:

## Locating devices

A variety of locating devices, also called personal tracking devices, are available for purchase. Types of devices include GPS, radio frequency and cell phones. These technologies are constantly changing. The Alzheimer Society of B.C. does not currently endorse any particular type or brand of locating technology.

To learn more about locating devices visit [www.alzheimerbc.org](http://www.alzheimerbc.org), call the First Link® Dementia Helpline at 1-800-936-6033 or contact your local Alzheimer Resource Centre.



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### References:

Strategies are reprinted with permission from: Snyder, L. (2010). *Living your best with early-stage Alzheimer's: An essential guide* (pp. 87-88). North Branch, MN: Sunrise River Press.

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