

Seniors Safety: Reducing Risk and Maintaining Independence **By: Denise Ansell, Client Support Coordinator**

We are all at risk of having some unforeseen accident happen and we accept this as a part of everyday living. We would never want to stop doing the things we do because we might get hurt, to do so would be to stop living. This is no different for a person who has been diagnosed with a memory problem. Many people with dementia want to continue to live independently and in their own home for as long as possible. This is more difficult as the individual's dementia progresses making everyday situations become more difficult to manage.

Avoid Falls

For persons with dementia, falls can cause injury, reduce activity and lead to a loss of confidence. Practicing safe strategies to avoid falls can help a person with dementia to maintain their independence while reducing the risk of harm.

- Home Safety - check the home for possible hazards such as rugs, loose carpets or other objects that are lying on the floor
- Exercise - regular exercise can improve strength and balance
- Medication - many medications have side effects including dizziness. Changes to medication or taking multiple medications can increase the risk of falls. Speak to your doctor about a medication review
- Healthy Feet - foot problems such as foot pain and long toenails can increase the risk of falls. Ensure foot issues are dealt with.
- Proper Foot Wear - ensure shoes have adequate support, fit well and have rubber soles
- Eyesight - regular eye tests and using corrective lenses may help to prevent falls
- Keep Objects in Reach - if it is something that is used regularly; keep in a cupboard or drawer that is easy to access
- Try Not to Rush - do things at an appropriate pace as many people fall while rushing

Improve Lighting

For persons with dementia, lighting can cause a reduction in visual acuity, disorientation and uncertainty. Dementia can cause damage to the visual system as well as, decrease sensitivity to differences in contrast, reduce ability to detect movement, reduce ability to detect different colours, changes to the visual field and double vision. Removing visual clutter and distractions such as busy patterns on carpets and furniture is best along with utilizing colour contrasts to make things clearer.

Home Adaptations

As people age they may experience difficulties in managing day to day activities such as cooking or bathing. Making some adaptations to the home can help a person with dementia to maintain their independence while reducing the risk of harm.

- Cupboards and objects can be labeled with pictures and words so that they can be easily identified

- Utilize devices that are easily identifiable and are used for one function only (Eg. kettle or toaster)
- Utilize appliances that have an automatic shut off feature
- Ensure clear, easy follow instructions are located somewhere visible
- Make sure the kitchen is well lit
- If the person is no longer able to use the stove independently, turn it off from the breaker or remove the fuses from the stove, and use the microwave
- Turn the hot water heater down
- Remove mirrors if distressing to the person
- Consider removing all sharp knives or other dangerous objects once the person's ability to recognize danger decreases
- Ensure all fire detectors are functioning and have batteries changed frequently

Medication

Medication should be stored safely out of reach. If the individual wishes to administer their own medications, you may want to consider using a dosette or blister package for the medication. This will ensure that the individual is taking the correct amount of medication when required.

Keep a Record

Keep a list of useful phone numbers in a convenient location or program them into the telephone. This list of numbers should include caregivers, friends, family, professionals or home care agencies, household repair and service contract numbers such as the gas company and electrical company as well as, the police, fire department and local hospital.

Support Networks and Services

It is important for an individual who has dementia and is alone for long periods of time to have a designated support person. Utilizing various community support agencies can assist an individual in maintaining independence by providing services such as;

- Meals on Wheels
- Adult Day Centre Programs
- Transportation Services
- Support Group Programs
- Health Care Navigation

Stay Safe Outside

It is important to continue practicing safe measures while enjoying the outdoors;

- Make sure outdoor areas are well lit
- Ensure there are railings on stairs and decks
- Avoid trip hazards such as loose patio stones, unraveled hoses or uneven surfaces
- Have a seating area so the person may sit if they are unsteady on their feet
- Use shelter or sunscreen to protect the individual from the sun
- Drink plenty of fluids on hot days

Alzheimer Society

PETERBOROUGH, KAWARTHA LAKES, NORTHUMBERLAND & HALIBURTON

- Subscribe to Medic Alerts Safely Home if the person is at risk of becoming lost
<http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/Living-with-dementia/Day-to-day-living/Safety/Safely-Home>

Each individual with dementia will have different issues that will increase their risk. It is important to speak to the individual to ensure there is an awareness of the amount of risk that individual is willing to take in order to maintain their independence. With this in mind, one must assess the living situation of the individual to identify any potential risks. By putting some of the mentioned strategies in place this may give the person the opportunity to continue to live to their fullest potential with purpose and quality.

For further details on keeping your home safe, see the publication, Home Safety for People with Alzheimer's disease on the website for U.S. National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Aging.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/Publications/homesafety.htm>