

The Risk of Wandering

Wandering sounds innocent enough, but quickly takes on special meaning in a long-term care home. For many residents, wandering is a side effect of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, or a reaction to the behaviour of others, sounds, anxiety, insecurity, sleep disorders, medications or a change in caregiver.

While wandering is often not a problem, long-term care home staff know too well that occasionally it leads to residents injuring themselves, infringing on the rights of others or placing themselves or others in danger.

There are no foolproof solutions. The long-term care centre is a home, not a prison, and staff go to great lengths to protect residents' right to freedom of movement. On the other hand, no one resident can be watched 24 hours a day.

Once staff understand the cause of the wandering and its pattern, they develop a plan to try and minimize it. For example, if a change of caregiver upsets a resident and causes wandering, staff may schedule an activity to prevent the resident from noticing the change in shift.

Staff also work with families who are fearful that the wandering behaviour may result in a fall. Some families have been known to insist that staff restrain residents, for example by applying a wheelchair safety belt. Restraints, however, are a "solution" that is rarely in the residents' best interests, and staff vigorously avoid using them.

What does work? Staff who are alert. Regular half-hour checks of residents who are most at risk. Emergency systems like "Code 333 Mrs. Smith" on the intercom, which signals staff to interrupt what they're doing and look for Mrs. Smith.

All Extendicare homes have alarms on all exit doors. However, alarms on the front doors and service entrances are sometimes turned off for the convenience of visitors, staff and people making deliveries — which means vigilance is required to make sure wandering residents don't walk out these doors.

Many cognitively impaired residents walk briskly and convince strangers they are perfectly in control. It has happened that visitors, or even staff who don't know these residents, have made the mistake of helping them out the door.

Although the various alarm systems used in Extendicare homes meet and in some cases exceed stringent government regulations, Extendicare has upgraded all of them. In many of our homes, at-risk residents actually wear part of the alarm system: a bracelet. For example, in one sophisticated system, the bracelet is connected to an electro-magnetic door lock that automatically locks when the door is approached by a resident wearing a bracelet — and unlocks when the resident moves away (as well as, of course, in case of fire). Only residents in danger of wandering away will wear these optional bracelets — there may be a small monthly cost to residents depending on the province in which they reside.

Families may wish to become familiar with the alarm system that has been installed in the long-term care home where their relative is a resident.

If you have any questions about wandering or Extendicare's door alarms, please talk to the director of care.