

Alzheimer's/Dementia Home Safety Checklist

This checklist along with the article that follows titled “**Tips for a Safe and Supportive Home**” can help you to provide a safe home environment for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia related disorder.

1. Throughout the Home

- Exterior doors have secure, safety-proof locks.
- Rugs/carpet edges are safely secured.
- Throw rugs have been removed.
- Problem floor/wall coverings have been removed or replaced (e.g., dark rugs confused for holes; patterned designs that are causing irritation).
- Furniture is arranged to allow for safe walkways and pathways.
- Other walkways/pathways through house are clear of obstacles and free of clutter.
- Furniture being used for support while ambulating is stable and secure.
- Glare from lighting or sunlight has been reduced as much as possible.
- Lighting is adequate and even in all the accessible areas of your home and special lighting has been added where needed (e.g., night lights in halls and bathrooms).
- Colored stickers have been applied to large windows and sliding glass doors.
- Poisonous plants have been removed.
- Surface spaces in accessible rooms are free of clutter.
- Steps/stairs have:
 - Railings that run the entire length.
 - Railings along both sides.
 - Clearly visible edges (apply a slip-resistant strip in a contrasting color to the edges if needed).
- Guns or firearms have been removed OR secured and disabled.
- Alcohol is locked up.
- Electric outlets are covered (if not in use).
- Lamp, extension and phone cords are located away from walking paths.
- Access to garage, basement, and any other unsafe areas is restricted.
- Access to computers or other electronics is secured or restricted (if needed).
- Valuable or irreplaceable items have been secured or removed (safety precaution in case your loved one hides or hoards belongings).

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2. Kitchen

- All dangerous/poisonous materials and supplies have been locked up.
- Garbage disposal is disabled, or switch is hidden or camouflaged.
- Knives and any other dangerous utensils are locked up.
- Small electrical appliances are stored out of sight.
- Appliances used regularly have automatic shut-offs (e.g., coffee pot, iron).
- Larger appliances (like the microwave) are unplugged or disabled in some way to prevent easy use.
- Stove has been safety-proofed (e.g., knobs removed when not needed, hooked up to hidden gas valve or electric switch, etc.).
- Fire extinguisher is located nearby.
- Refrigerator is cleaned out regularly.

3. Bathroom(s)

- Water heater temperature has been set at 120 degrees or less OR anti-scalding devices are installed in faucets.
- Grab bars are installed in tub/shower and by toilet.
- Toilet riser is being used (if needed).
- Shower chair or seat is being used (if needed).
- Slippery surfaces have been modified for safety.
- Electric bathroom products are stored away (e.g., razors, hairdryers, curling irons).
- Locks have been removed from door(s).
- Dangerous items have been removed from the medicine cabinet, cupboards and surface areas.
- Mirrors have been covered or removed if causing irritation or fears.
- Faucets are easy to turn on and off (newer, single-lever or single-handle faucets can be confusing to operate for someone with dementia).

4. Care Receiver's Bedroom

- No electric blankets or heating pads are being used.
- Bed is located in a safe position in the room (if falls are a concern, maybe the bed needs to be lowered to the floor or pushed against a wall).
- If bed has a railing, there is minimal space between bed and railing.
- There is a clear, well lit pathway (free of obstacles and distractions) between the bedroom and the bathroom.
- Door lock has been removed.

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5. Garage

- Hand and power tools are locked up.
- Access to large equipment has been secured (e.g., mower, weed trimmer).
- Poisonous chemicals and products are locked up (e.g., paint, gas for mower, fertilizers).
- All sets of keys to any motorized vehicles are secured and inaccessible.

6. Outdoors

- Walking area is obstacle and hazard-free.
- Fence gates are locked.
- Steps/stairs have:
 - Railings that run the entire length.
 - Railings along both sides.
 - Clearly visible edges (apply a slip-resistant strip in a contrasting color to the edges if needed).
- Gas grill has been disconnected or has been moved to a restricted area for use.
- Water hoses are stored away or secured.
- Garden tools are stored away or secured.

7. Other Issues

- Care Receiver is enrolled in the Alzheimer's Association Safe Return Program. Friends, family and neighbors have been alerted about the Alzheimer's/dementia and they know that wandering may occur. You also have a current photo should you need to report your loved one as missing.
- You (the family caregiver) are prepared for emergencies with an up-to-date list of emergency phone numbers for local police and fire departments, hospitals and poison control hotlines.
- You (the family caregiver) have created a place in the house designated as your personal space (or respite area) and access to this area is restricted.
- You (the family caregiver) understand that more safety-proofing may be required as the Alzheimer's disease/dementia progresses.

References:

- Bakker, Rosemary. *GEM Environmental Assessment*. Cornell University, 2005.
- *Safety at Home: Adapting the home to support the person with dementia*. Alzheimer's Association, 2005.
- Warner, Mark L. *The Complete Guide to Alzheimer's Proofing Your Home*. Purdue University Press, 2000.

Tips for a Safe and Supportive Home

Having a safe and supportive home is an important concern when caring for a person with dementia. As the disease progresses, your loved one may lose the ability to tell good from bad, harmful from safe, and appropriate from inappropriate. Changes in vision and cognition may make it difficult for them to distinguish colors or even understand what is being seen. Use the checklist with these tips – along with your creativity, flexibility and problem solving skills – to adapt your home to support these changes.

Adapt to Vision/Sight Changes

Diffuse bright light. Reducing glare can help to ease agitation. If needed, remove or cover mirrors and glass tops or highly polished furniture. Block bright sunlight by covering windows with blinds, shades or sheer draperies. Avoid using bare light bulbs or clear “decorator” bulbs without shades.

Create an even level of lighting. Changes in levels of light can be disorienting to a person with dementia so add extra lighting in entryways, areas between rooms, and in stairways. Also add extra lighting to areas of your home where lighting is uneven since dark and shadowy areas can be scary and unsettling – especially in the evening and night time hours.

Install special lighting. Use night lights in hallways, bedrooms, and bathrooms to prevent accidents and to reduce disorientation – especially if your loved one wanders at night. Illuminated light switches and light timers in these areas can also help.

Use different colors. Use contrasting colors to make things stand out and be more visible. For example, if your bathroom is all white, add a colored toilet seat cover and colored, non-slip rug next to the base to make a white toilet easier to see OR paint the wall behind the toilet in a contrasting color. If there are steps that your loved one needs to use in your home, add a slip-resistant strip in a contrasting color to the front edge of these steps so the edge is visible. Put colored stickers on glass doors and large windows so your loved one won't think they are open.

Remove or replace any problem floor and wall coverings. Dark-colored rugs may look like holes to someone with dementia. This is called “visual cliffing” – confusing changes in colors as differences in depth or

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elevation. Floor coverings with dark areas can create similar misinterpretations. Rugs and wallpaper with busy patterns can also be a source of confusion or irritation for someone with dementia (e.g., the busy pattern may look like something on the floor that needs to be picked up or stepped over).

Remove or cover mirrors if needed. Some people with dementia misinterpret reflections in mirrors. Remove or cover the mirror if the image becomes a source of fear (i.e., there is a stranger in my home!) or a source of concern (the “friend” who requires care such that they keep stealing or hiding food for them). Leave well enough alone if the image seems to be a source of comfort for your loved one (their friend and confident).

Limit Access to Potentially Dangerous Areas

Install locks. Install safety-proof locks either high or low on doors to make it difficult for your loved one to wander out of the house or to gain access to potentially dangerous areas.

Disguise access to hazardous areas. Cover doors and locks with a painted mural or cloth. Use “Dutch” (half) doors, swinging doors or folding doors to hide entrances to the kitchen, stairwell, workroom, or any other potentially hazardous areas.

Consider other barrier ideas. Put a “Stop” sign or “Do Not Enter” sign on doors to limit access to the outside or to restricted areas in your home. A black mat in front of a door can act as a barrier if it appears to be an impassable hole to the person with dementia.

Beware of Dangerous Objects and Substances

Limit use of certain appliances and equipment in the kitchen. Remember that even the most basic appliance or household object can become dangerous for a person with dementia. Safely store dangerous items like mixers and knives. Disable, hide or camouflage the switch to your garbage disposal. Unplug or disable large appliances like the microwave. Safety-proof the stove (e.g., remove burner and oven knobs when not in use or hook up the stove to a hidden gas valve or electric switch).

Use special safety devices. Child-proof locks and gadgets can help limit access to storage areas for dangerous items like knives, certain types of

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appliances and equipment, as well as cleaning fluids and other poisonous products. Use automatic shut-off devices for appliances like irons, toaster ovens, and coffeemakers.

Keep the refrigerator safe. A person with dementia may be unable to tell the difference between fresh and uncooked (or rotten) food. Clean out your refrigerator on a regular basis and throw out any old food. Store safe foods in the front of the refrigerator, at eye level, where your loved one can easily see them.

Be aware of items that can look like food. Remove toxic plants and decorative fruits (plastic, wax, etc.) that can be mistaken for real food. Also remove vitamins, prescription drugs, sugar substitutes, and seasonings from the kitchen table and counters.

Remove electrical appliances from the bathroom. Consider how dangerous it is to mix electricity and water and remove easy access to such things as electric razors and hair dryers in the bathroom to reduce the risk of electric shock.

Lock up medications. Install locks on some of your bathroom cabinets to limit access to medications and other potentially dangerous items.

Secure other dangerous items around the house. Secure access to grills, lawn mowers, power tools, guns – along with keys to THE CAR. Your loved one may not remember how to safely use or operate these things, making them very dangerous.

Restrict access to tobacco and alcohol. Smoking can be dangerous for a person with dementia. Alcohol can have many negative effects, especially when mixed with medication.

Secure household chemicals. Keep cleaning supplies and other household chemicals in a safe and secure place so your loved one can't mistakenly ingest them.

Take Precautions with Daily Activities

Keep walking areas clear. Keep floors and other surfaces as clutter free as possible. Create safe walkways throughout the house by removing potential obstacles such as excess furniture and electrical cords.

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Watch temperatures. As the disease progresses, your loved one may become less aware of temperature. To avoid water burns, consider setting your hot water heater at no more than 120 degrees, or install anti-scalding devices in your faucets. Provide help with mixing hot and cold water and monitor water temperature during bathing or showering. Check food temperature before serving to make sure it's not too hot or too cold to eat.

Prevent falls. Install safety and grab bars in bathroom(s). Consider adding shower seats, bath chairs, commode chairs or toilet risers to make activities in the bathroom safer. Add textured stickers to slippery surfaces. Remove rugs that aren't necessary and use non-slip rugs where needed. Place padding on any sharp edges of counters and bathroom fixtures.

Uninstall locks. Remove locks on bathroom and bedroom doors so your loved one can't get locked inside. You could also remove these doors and hang a shower curtain in these doorways for privacy and easy access.

Create a Supportive Home

Encourage independence. Think about creating a safe and therapeutic environment that helps and contributes to the functioning level of your loved one. Don't fill it with barriers and make it so restrictive that it discourages them from moving around independently.

Simplify your home. The simpler things are in your home (and the less clutter), the fewer environmental inputs there are to interpret and cause confusion.

Don't restrict access to all drawers and cabinets. Keep some drawers and cabinets that your loved one can access. Too many locked areas can cause frustration and even anger,

Keep them involved in daily life. Encourage your loved one to help you with daily activities like preparing meals, doing dishes, and yard work. These kinds of activities can enhance self-esteem and make them feel more valued.

Provide access to outdoors. Include supervised outdoor activities like gardening and walking in your weekly schedule. If it's possible, secure an outdoor area where your loved one can come and go on their own. If there is no safe option for this, plan indoor activities in a room filled with light and windows to the outside (maybe an enclosed porch or balcony).

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Be prepared for emergencies. Keep a list of emergency phone numbers and addresses for local police and fire departments, hospitals, and poison control hotlines. Check fire extinguishers and smoke alarms on a regular basis. Register with the Alzheimer's Association Safe Return Program and always have a current photo available should you need to report your loved one as missing.

Don't forget that you deserve your own supportive space. Consider creating a space in your home that is designated JUST FOR YOU. If possible, restrict access to this area so you have some place to get away to when you have the opportunity to take a break from caregiving.

References:

- *Safety at Home: Adapting the home to support the person with dementia.* Alzheimer's Association, 2005.
- Warner, Mark L. *The Complete Guide to Alzheimer's Proofing Your Home.* Purdue University Press, 2000.