How Families Can Help a Loved One Who Gets Lost Outdoors

Understanding the Risks and Starting the Conversation

When a family member has dementia, Alzheimer's, or a cognitive condition, the risk of wandering and getting lost outdoors is a real concern. It can happen quickly - a person steps outside for a moment, becomes disoriented, and cannot find their way back. For families, this creates anxiety and a need for practical strategies. The first step is to have an open, calm conversation with the person and with other family members. Discuss the possibility of wandering without alarming them. Frame it as a shared plan for safety, not as a restriction. Explain that the goal is to preserve their freedom while giving everyone peace of mind. This conversation sets the stage for the steps that follow.

Step One: Assess the Person's Habits and Environment

Start by observing the person's daily patterns. Do they tend to wander at a particular time of day? Do they head in a certain direction? Knowing these habits helps you plan. Also look at the home environment. Are there obvious triggers that prompt them to go outside - a door that leads to a familiar garden, a view of a bus stop, or a noise from the street? Simple changes can reduce the urge to wander. For example, placing a black mat in front of an exterior door can make it look like a hole to a person with depth perception issues, or adding a latch at the top of the door out of their line of sight. But physical barriers are not enough on their own. You also need a system that alerts you if they do leave.

Step Two: Choose a Reliable Location-Sharing Device

A personal alarm with GPS tracking is a central tool for location support for independent outings. These devices are worn as a pendant, wristband, or clipped to a belt. When the person goes outside, the device can share their real-time location with family members via a smartphone app. Look for a device that offers automatic fall detection and two-way calling, so the person can speak to someone if they are confused or scared. The device should work on the mobile network in your area, and it should have a long battery life. Some devices let you set up a geofence - a virtual boundary around the home. If the person crosses it, you receive an alert. This gives you immediate awareness without constant monitoring. When choosing a device, consider the person's comfort and willingness to wear it. A device that is bulky or uncomfortable will likely be left behind. Options include a lanyard, wristband, belt clip, armband, or keyring attachment. Let them try different styles to see what feels best.



Step Three: Set Up the System and Test It Together

Once you have a device, set it up with the person present. Program the emergency contact numbers into the device - these can be family members, friends, neighbours, or carers. Many devices allow you to set a calling order: if the first person does not answer, the device tries the next one, and so on. It can also be programmed to call emergency services directly. Test the device together. Have the person press the SOS button while you are in another room. Confirm that the alert reaches your phone and that the GPS location is accurate. This testing builds trust. The person sees that the device works, and you see that the system is reliable. Also test the device in different locations around the home and garden, so you know its range. Some devices work only within a certain distance from the base unit; others work wherever there is mobile coverage. Knowing the limits helps you set realistic expectations.

View the location on Google Maps

Familyr is also on YouTube.

Step Four: Create a Wandering Response Plan

No system is foolproof. You also need a plan for what to do if the person does get lost. First, designate a primary contact person who receives the alert and decides the next steps. That

person should have a list of phone numbers for other family members, neighbours, and local emergency services. Second, keep a recent photo of the person and a list of places they might go - a former home, a favourite park, a shop. Third, consider registering the person with a local Alzheimer's or dementia support group, which may offer a wandering response service. Fourth, practice the plan. Role-play a scenario where the person cannot be found. Time how quickly you can gather information and start searching. This practice reveals gaps in your plan and helps everyone stay calm in a real emergency.

Step Five: Use Location Support for Independent Outings

Once the device and plan are in place, the person can enjoy more freedom. They can go for a walk, visit a neighbour, or sit in the garden without someone hovering over them. The GPS tracking gives you the confidence to let them have that independence. You can check their location from your phone, and if they wander outside the safe zone, you get an alert. This is a form of location support for independent outings that balances safety with dignity. The person feels less confined, and you feel less anxious. Over time, you may notice patterns in their wandering that help you adjust the geofence boundaries or change the times when they are most likely to go out. Use this information to refine the plan.

Step Six: Review and Update the System Regularly

The person's condition may change. Their ability to remember how to use the device, their physical mobility, or their preferred walking routes may shift. Every few months, review the system. Check the device's battery, test the GPS accuracy, and update the contact list if phone numbers have changed. Also talk to the person about how they feel about the device. Are they still comfortable wearing it? Do they understand its purpose? If they resist, try a different attachment method or a different style of device. The goal is to maintain a system that works for everyone.



What to Watch For

Watch for signs that the person is becoming more disoriented. They might start leaving the house at unusual times or expressing confusion about where they are. Also watch for technical issues: the device might lose signal in certain areas of the home, or the battery might drain faster than expected. Test the device in those areas and consider a signal booster if needed. Privacy is another concern. Decide who in the family will have access to the location data. Sharing it with too many people can feel invasive to the person. Limit it to the primary caregivers and one or two backups. Explain the privacy settings of the device and how to turn off location sharing when it is not needed.

When to Call for Help

If the person does not return within a reasonable time and you cannot locate them via the device, call emergency services immediately. Do not wait. The sooner you involve professionals, the better the chance of a safe return. Keep a list of local police and search-and-rescue contact numbers near the phone. Also have the person's medical information and a list of their medications ready to share with responders.



Supporting a loved one who gets lost outdoors is about preparation, not restriction. With a thoughtful plan and the right tools, you can help them stay safe while preserving their quality of life. For more information on personal medical alarms with GPS tracking, contact Familyr at 14 Grand View Road, Remuera, Auckland 1050, New Zealand, or call +64 9 872 0345.