

Traveling

THE SITUATION

With many families spread across the country or across continents, thank heavens for phones, the Internet and the Postal Service. Still, nothing beats a face to face visit. For a person with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia, the issue of traveling—whether to visit relatives or touring—can raise concerns. Caregivers must decide whether it is appropriate for their loved ones to take a trip alone, if at all, and what steps to take to ease the journey.

THE SOLUTION

Evaluate the person's condition. Before making any travel plans, consider the person's memory, judgment and other cognitive functions, behavior issues and co-existing medical conditions. Someone in the early stages of the disease often is still capable of traveling solo. Ask for his or her input—about comfort level and any concerns. Whether the person is traveling alone or with a companion will impact many of the other decisions that need to be made before packing one's bags.

Consult with a healthcare professional. If your loved one is determined to travel and you are hesitant based on your own observations, speak to his or her doctor. If the doctor feels that a trip may be problematic, ask the clinician to have a heart-to-heart talk with him or her; sometimes, relatives are more willing to follow a professional's advice than yours.

Practice traveling alone. Have your loved one take a short trip alone near home first, so long as wandering behavior is not an issue. This exercise can be a good indicator of how the person will fare for more extended travel.

Consider the method of transportation. Discuss preferences with your loved one; he or she might be able to still safely drive a car, for example. If the person is incapable of making this decision, consider preferred methods of travel in the past, and the mode with easiest access and least confusion. With public transportation, discuss any concerns with a travel agent or company official—like asking for assistance in making sure a family member is allowed to greet the person in the arrival area.

Limit the number of stops. Will traveling from place to place, such as visiting several family members or stopping in different cities, add to any existing confusion? The most successful visits will most likely be to fewer places and to ones that are somewhat familiar. In light of this, you may suggest that family members gather in one person's home to maximize visiting while minimizing moving around.

Enlist a companion. If it is agreed that your loved one should not travel alone, make arrangements for you or someone else to travel along. If you are driving, think about inviting another driver or passenger in the car to help care for a loved one who needs extra attention.

Plan to stop regularly to stretch, use the bathroom and eat. Try to keep to the person's usual meal times.

Prepare hosts about caregiving responsibilities.

Advise them of your loved one's medical condition, medication regimens, any difficulties with activities of daily living such as dressing and bathing, and possible behavior challenges. Also share the person's food preferences. Offer suggestions about ensuring the person's safety, especially if he or she has a tendency to wander. These steps will help to maintain a normal routine, which may limit confusion and make the visit seem more like being at home.

Make a checklist of things to carry along. One essential item is bottled water since it is especially important for older adults to drink enough fluids during the course of the day to prevent dehydration. Also bring activities that will keep your loved one calm and engaged, such as a deck of cards, magazines and some favorite music. Most importantly, no one should leave home without several forms of identification, emergency contact information, and copies of medical records and other important documents.

– JUDITH RACE, LMSW

Reference:

Hitting the Road. Care Advantage Magazine. Winter 2008. AFA Alzheimer's Foundation of America. New York, NY.