Safety Issues for People with Dementia

Why is safety an issue for individuals with Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias?

Cognitive decline impairs function, which can be especially challenging for people with Alzheimer’s and other dementias. Most people living with Alzheimer’s are 65 years of age or older and older adults are already susceptible to geriatric conditions such as falls. Impaired function that impedes gait and balance makes these older adults even more vulnerable to injury. In fact, the primary reasons for hospitalizations among people with Alzheimer’s disease are for falls, fainting, and trauma. In disaster and emergency situations, people with Alzheimer’s disease are at an even higher risk of injury and harm.

In addition, six in 10 people with dementia will wander. Anyone who has memory problems and is able to walk is at risk for wandering. Even in the early stages of dementia, a person can become disoriented or confused for a period of time. When coupled with memory loss and confusion, wandering puts people with dementia at higher risk of getting lost or injured. Individuals with dementia who wander are also at higher risk of accidental death, likely due to the lack of recognition of harmful situations and delays in seeking medical attention.

What about safety plans for people with Alzheimer’s?

Safety plans can reduce the risk of harm or injury while enabling people with Alzheimer’s and other dementias to continue participating in everyday activities, living in the community, and travelling. Safety plans for people with Alzheimer’s and other dementias should include:

- Identification jewelry such as an ID bracelet or medical ID bracelet, which can provide succinct information about individuals with dementia if they become lost or injured.
- A GPS locator device or services such as the Alzheimer’s Association ComfortZone®, a web-based GPS locator and monitoring service, or MedicAlert® + Alzheimer’s Association Safe Return®, an emergency response service for those who wander away from home. GPS location devices give individuals with dementia freedom and independence while providing reassurance for their caregivers and families.

How can the public health community help address this issue?

Public health practitioners can utilize existing public health structures and practices to meet the safety needs of people living with Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias. Consider the following three items:

- Encourage the development and promote the importance of safety plans as part of established public health programs that reach older adults, such as falls prevention or healthy aging programs.
- Include cognitive health, and the specific needs of those with cognitive decline, in state-based plans and strategies including transportation, disaster preparedness, and falls prevention.
- Educate first responders about the unique needs of those with Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias. Local Alzheimer’s Association chapters can provide information on incorporating safety issues for people with the disease into local public health programming for first responders.