When a Loved One with Dementia Goes Missing: Steps That Work

What to Do Immediately

If a person with dementia leaves home and does not return, every minute matters. The first response should be a structured search that involves the person's known habits, local neighbours, and the police. Time is the critical factor: the sooner you act, the smaller the area to cover and the better the chance of a safe return.

Start by checking the immediate area, inside the home, the garden, and any outbuildings. Dementia can cause disorientation even in familiar spaces. Then call neighbours and nearby relatives who might have seen the person. If there is no sign within 15 to 30 minutes, contact the local police. Tell them the person has dementia and is likely confused, and describe the clothing they were wearing and any medical needs. Many police services now have a dementia-friendly protocol and will act quickly even though there is no legal requirement to wait 24 hours.

Why People with Dementia Wander

Wandering is one of the most common and worrying behaviours in dementia. The person may be looking for something from the past, a childhood home, a former workplace, a deceased spouse. They might feel anxious and try to go somewhere that feels safe, or they may simply become disoriented and walk without a clear destination. Sundowning, the tendency to become more agitated in the late afternoon or evening, increases the risk. Fatigue, hunger, or a change in routine can also trigger wandering.

Understanding the likely triggers helps families plan ahead. A person who wanders is not being deliberately difficult; their brain is sending confusing signals. The goal is not to stop all movement but to keep the person safe while allowing them as much independence as possible.



Build a Care Plan Before an Emergency

A written care plan shared with neighbours, family, and local shops can save precious time. The plan should list the person's usual walking routes, favourite destinations (such as a park or a café), and any recurring themes in their wandering, for example, they always head toward water or try to go to a former workplace. Also note any physical characteristics that stand out: gait, posture, a favourite hat or coat. Update the plan every few months because dementia can change preferences and abilities.

Include a recent photograph of the person, ideally showing them in the kind of clothes they normally wear. Store a digital copy on a phone and give a printed copy to a neighbour who is home during the day. This photograph is the single most useful item for police and search teams.

Use Technology That Respects Dignity

Tracking technology for someone with dementia has moved beyond bulky devices that feel intrusive. Many families now choose a discreet tracker for wandering that the person can wear without feeling watched or labelled. A device that fits into a pocket, clips onto a belt, or is worn as a pendant can give caregivers peace of mind while preserving the person's sense of normal life.

A discreet tracker for wandering works by sending location data to a smartphone app. If the person leaves a safe zone, a geofence set around the home or a familiar area, the app alerts the caregiver immediately. Some trackers combine GPS location with Wi-Fi positioning, which helps indoors where satellite signals are weak. That mix of technologies covers both the house and the wider neighbourhood. An alert can be the difference between a short walk and a full-scale search.

What to Look For in a Tracker

- Battery life that lasts several days without frequent charging.
- A design that the person will accept wearing, no straps that irritate or clasps they can undo.
- Geofence alerts that you can set to match the person's usual range.
- Two-way communication so you can speak to the person if they become confused.

No device replaces human care, but a well-chosen tracker can reduce the number of times a person goes missing and shorten the search when they do.

What to Do When the Search Expands

If the person is not found within the first hour, involve more people. Assign one person to stay at home in case the person returns on their own. Contact local hospitals, taxi companies, and public transport hubs. A person with dementia may board a bus or train without knowing where it is going. Give these organisations a description and the recent photograph.



Social media can be effective if used carefully. Post a clear photo, the person's name, the area they were last seen, and a contact number. Ask people not to approach or chase the person, as that can frighten them and cause them to hide. Instead, ask them to call the police or the family contact.

Keep track of where searches have already been done. A simple map with pins or a list of streets checked prevents wasted effort. If the weather is cold or wet, check sheltered spots such as bus stops, church porches, and public buildings that might be unlocked.

After the Person Is Found

When the person returns safely, avoid scolding or showing anger. They may not remember that they were lost, and a harsh reaction can increase their anxiety and make future wandering more likely. Instead, offer reassurance, a warm drink, and a chance to rest. Later, review what happened. Did they leave through a particular door? Was there a trigger such as a noise or a change in routine? Small adjustments to the environment, a latch at the top of the door, a sensor that chimes when a door opens, or a visual cue that reminds them not to go out alone, can help prevent a repeat.

Also check the tracking device. Did it alert you in time? Was the geofence set too wide or too narrow? Adjusting the settings based on real events makes the system more useful over time.

Prevention That Respects Freedom

The goal of prevention is not to confine the person but to give them a safe way to move. Some families install door alarms that sound a soft chime when a door opens, giving the caregiver a moment to check. Others put a black mat in front of the door: for some people with dementia, a visual change like this is enough to stop them from stepping out. Regular walks together at the same time each day can reduce the urge to wander alone because the person knows they will get outside anyway.



Technology can play a part too. A tracker that offers both GPS and Wi-Fi positioning gives reliable location data wherever the person goes, without needing a monthly subscription. That kind of predictable support lets families step back a little, knowing they will be alerted if anything goes wrong. It is not about surveillance; it is about giving the person with dementia the dignity of moving freely while keeping them safe.

When the worst happens and a loved one goes missing, a calm, practiced response is your best tool. A plan, a recent photo, a supportive network, and a discreet tracker for wandering can turn a frightening situation into a short-lived scare. The key is to act fast, stay organised, and never blame the person for what their illness has done.