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Living at Home With Dementia

For adult children, the recognition that a parent has dementia can either be a slow process or it can be a body blow. This coupled with the parent's denial of a problem, or their desire to remain independent, or their wish to remain in their own home, can create a dilemma.

Because many of the early symptoms of dementia are consistent with the aging process, because the illness does not follow a prescribed pattern and change can happen gradually, and because it is not uncommon for those affected to devise strategies for keeping it confidential, our loved ones are often at risk.

As the disease progresses, simple tasks may become overwhelming. Try these tips:

- Purchase a telephone with large numbers and speed dial buttons
- Label the speed dial buttons with names [not numbers] of people commonly called
- For police, label the button as POLICE, not 911
- Make a sign to hang on the bathroom mirror outlining the morning routine: brush teeth, wash face, shave, brush hair
- Hang clothing as an outfit
- Store clothes and pajamas in different places
- Remove medications from the home that are no longer taken
- Sort medications into pill boxes marked with the day of week and time of day
- Hang a large calendar and encourage "crossing out" each day at the same time
- On appliances, such as the washer, dryer, microwave and stove, use nail polish to mark the dials with arrows indicating the normal settings
- Mark the thermostat with an arrow for the normal temperature

- Disable the stove by unplugging it or tripping the breaker
- Remove hazards from stairs and check banisters for security
- Package food in single-portion sizes or as a whole meal

When giving instructions, the key is to “keep it simple.” The person may be able to process only one thought at a time. Offer only one alternative. When preparing a meal, “Would you like a hamburger or soup?” When making an appointment, “Should we go at one or two?” For sequencing activities, “Would you like to do this now or after we eat?” Always speak directly, face to face. Use short sentences with simple words. A task requiring multiple steps, such as doing laundry, should be described in very small steps: Put the clothes into the washer, add the detergent, close the lid, turn the dial to wash.

Wandering is a common symptom and has frightening consequences both for the dementia sufferer and for the family. Try these suggestions:

- Sew ID tags into clothing - include the address and telephone number
- Install door alarms that will sound if the door is opened
- Place a large stop sign on all exit doors
- Bring a clear, color photo of your loved one to the local police and mark his or her name, address and telephone number - and yours - on the back

Personal hygiene may deteriorate. Telling your loved one to bathe, or that their breath is offensive, or that their toe and finger nails are unsightly can be very difficult. You may want to consider hiring a professional to assist with bathing and grooming twice a week. This removes the stigma of the constant reminder, spares dignity and saves embarrassment. The professional will be able to handle oral hygiene, nail care and will remove dirty clothes and offer fresh ones.

It is difficult to assess when a person affected with dementia is no longer safe at home. It depends not only on the individual but also on the household, the neighborhood, the proximity of family and a host of other factors. Unfortunately, all too often family members fail to recognize the signals or are unable to breach the topic and the implementation of precautionary measures is delayed.