

GUIDE · 7 MIN READ

Dementia and wandering: prevention, tech, and what to do in the first 15 minutes

Around 6 in 10 people with dementia will wander at some point. Most are found safe — and quickly — when families know what to do before it happens.

Why they wander

- Looking for someone or somewhere from earlier in life — a parent, a former workplace, a childhood home.
- Restlessness or boredom — under-stimulation is a bigger driver than people realise.
- Unmet needs without the words: hungry, needing the toilet, in pain, too hot or cold.
- Trying to 'go home' even when they are home — a sign of disorientation, not a literal request.
- Sundowning — the late-afternoon spike in confusion and agitation.

Prevention

- Daily exercise and outdoor time — even 20 minutes reduces evening agitation dramatically.
- Routine. The same walk, the same time, the same route. Predictability calms the urge to leave.
- Camouflage the front door — a curtain across it, or a 'STOP' sign, often works because the door stops being a door.

- Stair gates, contact alarms on doors, or a doorbell that chimes when opened — cheaper than people expect.
- Remove or lock car keys early. Many wandering incidents start with the car.
- ID jewellery or a sewn-in label with name and a phone number. No address.
- Register with your local dementia-friendly scheme: in the UK, the Herbert Protocol; in the US, MedicAlert + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return or local Silver Alert.

Tech that genuinely helps

- GPS smartwatches designed for dementia (e.g. those with one-button SOS and a long battery) — better than phone apps because they don't need unlocking.
- AirTag / Tile in a wallet, shoe insole, or sewn into a coat lining. Cheap and reliable as a backup.
- A second AirTag in the coat they always wear out — wandering people almost always grab the same coat.
- Door sensors (£15 / \$20) on the front door that ping your phone the moment it opens.

The Herbert Protocol & similar schemes

A "missing-person form" you fill in *now*, while everything is calm, and hand to the police the moment your loved one is missing. It saves the 20 minutes of panicked questions that matter most.

United Kingdom

- **Herbert Protocol** — a national police-backed form (named after Herbert, a WWII veteran with dementia who went missing). Covers photo, medication, places of significance, what they wear, mobile numbers. Download from your local police force website (search "[your force] Herbert Protocol"). Keep a copy on the fridge and a digital copy on your phone.
- **Philomena Protocol** — the same idea used by some forces (e.g. Greater Manchester) for missing children and vulnerable adults in care settings.
- **Purple Alert (Scotland)** — free Alzheimer Scotland app; sends a local alert to opted-in users when someone is reported missing.
- **Safe Places scheme** — high-street shops and libraries display a purple sticker; staff are trained to help a confused adult and phone a relative.

- **Hospital Passport / "This is Me" (Alzheimer's Society)** — not for wandering directly, but goes with them to A&E so staff know their dementia, triggers, and how to settle them.

United States

- **MedicAlert + Alzheimer's Association** (formerly Safe Return) — 24/7 emergency response, engraved ID bracelet, and a wandering-response network. Annual fee.
- **Silver Alert** — state-run emergency broadcast (highway signs, media, phone alerts) for missing older adults with cognitive impairment. Available in most states; rules and age thresholds vary.
- **Project Lifesaver** — a small radio-frequency wristband worn by the person; local sheriff's deputies carry tracking receivers and typically locate someone within 30 minutes. Check if your county participates.
- **LoJack SafetyNet** — similar RF tracking partnership with local law enforcement in many states.
- **Smart911** — free in many cities; you pre-load a profile (photo, diagnosis, address) that pops up on the 911 dispatcher's screen when you call.
- **File of Life** — magnetic pouch on the fridge with medical info; paramedics across the US are trained to look for it.

What every form should include

- Recent head-and-shoulders photo (under 6 months old).
- Full name, date of birth, height, weight, distinguishing marks.
- Dementia type and any other conditions (diabetes, heart, mobility).
- Medications taken — and what happens if a dose is missed.
- Places of significance: childhood home, former workplace, late spouse's grave, favourite café.
- The coat / shoes / bag they almost always leave with.
- Any tracker serial numbers (AirTag, GPS watch) and how to access them.
- Two emergency contacts with mobile numbers.

If they go missing — the first 15 minutes

1. Search the house thoroughly first — including cupboards, behind curtains, garden sheds, the car. Most 'missing' people are within 10 metres.

2. Check the route they walked most often when they were well — a former workplace, a school they once attended, a relative's old house.
3. Call 999 (UK) / 911 (US) without delay. Police take dementia wandering seriously and have specific protocols. Don't wait 24 hours — that rule does not apply to vulnerable adults.
4. Tell them: name, age, what they're wearing, dementia diagnosis, where you've already looked, what they might be heading towards, any GPS device serial.
5. Post in any local community groups (Facebook, Nextdoor) — neighbours often spot them within an hour.

Have the Herbert Protocol / Safe Return form ready

The Care Companion holds a printable 'if missing' summary — photo, places they've lived, what they usually wear, GPS device ID — ready to hand to the police in seconds. 7-day free trial.

[Start free trial](#)

General guidance. If a vulnerable adult is missing, call 999 (UK) / 911 (US) immediately — do not wait.

Free guide from The Care Companion — practical tools for families caring for someone with dementia. More guides at thecarecompanion.com/guides