

# Making Your Home Safe to Care for an Alzheimer's Patient

- by Michael S. Goryan, M.A.

Dementia is a collection of symptoms—memory loss, difficulty performing familiar tasks, problems with language, disorientation to time and place, poor or decreased judgment, problems with abstract thinking, misplacing things, changes in mood or behavior, changes in personality, and loss of initiative.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. There are other forms of dementia such as mini-strokes, Parkinson's disease, Pick's disease, et al.

When attempting to create a safe home environment for a person with dementia, it is important to keep one thing uppermost in your mind: anticipate being a parent as the dementia process reduces an adult's cognitive abilities to that of a child's.

“Mild dementia” equates to a 12 year-old's cognitive abilities; “moderate dementia” to about a 5 year-old's cognition; and “severe dementia” diminishes one's capabilities to a 2 year-old's and less.

In creating a safe environment you are “child-proofing” your home to keep it safe from a two, five or twelve year-old.

Safety tips include removing all cleaning supplies and other household products that might be toxic if swallowed. Put a lock on the cabinet that is used to store these or throw the products out. Examine your food cupboard as well. Some herbs, such as sage, can be harmful if a large quantity is ingested.

Lock up firearms and ammunition. Get gun locks if you insist on having guns in the house—and use the locks! Lock up power tools, too. Do not think that because your loved one is (was) adept at using power tools that he or she can still do so. Even in the mild stages of dementia the individual's abilities are diminished and an injury or damage to the home can occur.

Look around the house. What else would you not want a child to get into? Are the household plants safe? Many are toxic such as poinsettias and philodendrons. Remove or fence off plants outside the house such as oleanders, potato or tomato plants, and cactus and roses (because of thorns), to keep your loved one from eating or falling into the bushes. “Children” put things in their mouths.

Bodies of water such as a pool, spa, fountain, or stream, should be fenced off.

Restrict access to possible sources of fire or heat, such as the fireplace, stove (gas and wood-burning), oven, electric heater, and candles. Candles are not dangerous unless matches are available. So hide the matches, too.



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**Lock up or hide knives, scissors, letter openers, and any other object that could cause harm to them or to you.**

**Keep areas of potential hazard—basements, attics, tool sheds, garages, storage rooms, etc.—off limits. Keep areas that could be a hazard well lit, and install handrails if necessary.**

**Although it may be inconvenient, cap off electrical outlets that are not in use. “Children” love to poke objects into holes.**

**Lastly, hide the car keys or render the car unusable if necessary. Although your loved one has always been a good driver, dementia further slows reaction time and impairs judgment. Would you allow a 12-year-old to drive your car?**

**Hide the car at a friend’s house or at the home of a relative. This is when “therapeutic lies” are often necessary. “Honey, the car is in the shop,” or your children “are using it.” Be creative.**

**In order to make your home a safe place to care for your relative with Alzheimer’s disease, or another form of dementia, use common sense. Think like a child in accessing what a child might get into that could cause harm or be a potential danger.**

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