

The Caregiver's Journey[®]

Finally! Practical Tips and Candid Conversations
for Alzheimer's and Dementia Family Caregivers

Keeping Your Loved One Safe

A Comprehensive Safety Guide for
Dementia Family Caregivers

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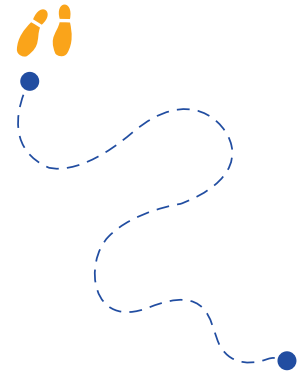
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This guide brings our years of experience in a variety of family caregiving roles. We are sharing our personal experiences, not medical advice, to help prepare you to navigate your caregiving journey.

Introduction: Safety Throughout the Journey



Safety concerns evolve throughout the dementia caregiving journey, often beginning with questions about driving and gradually expanding to encompass all aspects of daily life. Each safety challenge you face isn't just about protecting your loved one—it's about finding the balance between maintaining their independence and dignity while ensuring their well-being.

Safety considerations also include the safety of those around the person living with dementia. The person may have periods of agitation, delusions, and potential aggression. This affects not just the person with dementia, but the safety of everyone in the home. Families must honestly assess whether they can manage these behavioral challenges while maintaining a safe environment for everyone.

This guide is focused on the safety of the person living with dementia.

In this guide we address the major safety concerns you'll encounter, roughly in the order most caregivers experience them. From the early worries about driving safety to the later challenges of wandering and home modifications, we'll walk through practical strategies that have worked for countless families.

Safety isn't about taking away all independence at once. It's about making thoughtful adjustments that allow your loved one to maintain as much of their independence as possible while keeping everyone secure. As Sue and Nancy often say, "We're continuously observing and adjusting"—and that's exactly what good safety planning looks like.

The goal isn't perfection; it's preparation. With the right strategies and mindset, you can navigate these safety challenges with confidence, compassion, and the knowledge that you're doing everything possible to protect the person you love.

We're all on this journey together.

When to Address Driving Safety

Understanding Legal and Insurance Considerations

Addressing driving safety is often one of the first major safety decisions caregivers face. While this conversation is never easy, understanding the legal and insurance implications can provide a clear framework for making this crucial decision.

Research Your State's Requirements

Different US states have varying laws about driving with a dementia diagnosis:

- **Mandatory Reporting States:** Some states require doctors to report a dementia diagnosis within 10 days.
- **Unsafe Driver Reporting:** Many states allow family members or others to report unsafe drivers, requiring the person to take a driving test.

- **Testing Requirements:** Some states require periodic retesting for drivers with certain medical conditions.

Understanding Insurance and Legal Liability

The legal implications of continuing to drive after a dementia diagnosis can be severe:

- **Increased Liability:** If your loved one has been diagnosed with dementia and is involved in any accident—even if they're not at fault—the legal consequences can be significant.
- **Insurance Complications:** Insurance companies may deny claims or pursue legal action if they discover the driver had a known cognitive impairment.
- **Financial Exposure:** Families can face substantial lawsuits and financial damages.

The Doctor Conversation Strategy

One of the most effective approaches is having a medical professional explain the risks:

- **Request the Conversation:** Ask your loved one's doctor to discuss the legal and insurance implications directly with your care receiver.
- **Use Numbers and Facts:** If your loved one responds well to concrete information, this factual approach can be very effective.
- **Let the Professional Be the “Bad Guy”:** This removes you from the role of taking away the car keys.

Sue's experience demonstrates how effective this can be: “Recognizing that my hubby was a numbers guy, I called the doctor's office and asked if the doctor would be willing to talk with Jack about the risks of driving. I took Jack to the doctor's office. Jack went in. They had a conversation. They opened the door. Jack handed me the car keys, and he never asked to drive again.”



Independent Driver Evaluations

Professional driving assessments offer several advantages:

- **Objective Assessment:** Removes family members from making subjective judgments.
- **Professional Guidance:** Evaluators are trained to have difficult conversations.
- **Peace of Mind:** May confirm that driving is still safe, or provide professional validation that it's time to stop.

Benefits of Independent Evaluations:

- You don't risk failing a state-administered test (which would permanently revoke the license).
- Professional evaluators may identify ways to extend safe driving through modifications or restrictions.
- The recommendation comes from a neutral third party.
- Some people accept the decision more readily from a professional.

Preparing for Success

If you're able to have the legal/medical conversation successfully, prepare to support your loved one's continued independence:

- **Arrange Transportation:** Line up friends, family, or services to take them places.
- **Be Proactive:** Anticipate their needs and offer transportation before they ask.
- **Maintain Routines:** Ensure they can continue attending regular activities and appointments.
- **Preserve Dignity:** Frame the change as a practical decision rather than a loss of capability.

Sue describes her preparation: "I had lined up people who would reach out to my husband to offer to take him places. I made sure any place he wanted to go, I was right there on the spot proactively. He had meetings he went to in the morning. I made sure I got him there. I worked to make sure he never felt like he had lost his independence."

Tracking Your Loved One and Their Vehicle

If the direct conversation approach doesn't work, tracking provides a safety net that allows continued driving while giving you peace of mind and the ability to intervene if necessary.

Personal Tracking Options

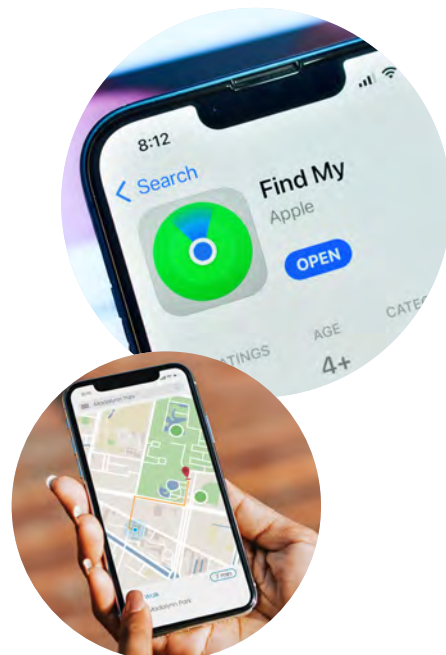
Modern technology offers multiple ways to track your loved one:

- **Smartphone Tracking:** Use "Find My Phone" features or similar apps.
- **Apple AirTags or Tile Devices:** Small, discrete tracking devices.
- **Smartwatches:** Smart watches or similar devices with GPS and fall detection.
- **Specialized GPS Devices:** Purpose-built tracking devices for seniors.

Vehicle Tracking Solutions

For monitoring driving habits and vehicle location:

- **Basic GPS Tracking:** Shows location only.
- **Advanced Monitoring Apps:** Track driving speed, routes, sudden stops, and other driving behaviors.
- **Professional Services:** Commercial vehicle tracking services with detailed reporting.



Following at a Distance

Some caregivers choose to physically follow their loved one to assess driving safety:

Sue shares a friend's experience: "We had a friend whose husband liked to play golf with his buddies, and they had a weekly standing tee time. Several of the other golfers told my friend that her husband was having trouble driving, and he was having trouble filling the car up with gas. One day he was trying to use a Starbucks card to pay for his gas. He wasn't sure how to turn left into where they were going, and she was concerned about that. So she followed him at a discrete distance and to see how safely he was driving, and she also recorded him, so that when they had the conversation she had examples.

Benefits of Tracking:

- **Emergency Response:** Ability to locate them if they become lost.
- **Peace of Mind:** Reduced anxiety while maintaining their independence.
- **Early Warning System:** Identify problems before accidents occur.
- **Documentation:** Concrete evidence of concerning driving patterns.

Gradually Taking Over Driving

Often, the transition from their driving to your driving can happen naturally through increased participation in their transportation.

Starting to Ride Along

Regular rides together serve multiple purposes:

- **Assessment Opportunity:** Observe their driving skills firsthand.
- **Gradual Transition:** Get them used to you being in the car.
- **Route Learning:** Understand their typical driving patterns.
- **Relationship Building:** Create positive associations with shared transportation.

Volunteering to Drive

Once you're regularly riding together, begin offering to drive:

- **Use Practical Excuses:** "I need to get gas in my car" or "I haven't driven your car in a while".
- **Make it About You:** Frame it as your preference rather than their limitation.
- **Be Consistent:** Gradually increase the frequency of your driving.
- **Stay Positive:** Keep the atmosphere light and casual.

Recognizing Their Limitations

Your loved one may actually welcome your driving more than you expect:

Nancy discovered: "It wasn't long until I was up to driving 80, 90% of the time. I think that was because my husband was more comfortable with me driving. He could go more places. When I was using the tracker, I figured out he really wasn't going very far from home and I think that's because he didn't know how to get places. Volunteering to drive opened up the opportunity to go places he didn't know how to get to on his own."

Family Examples of Successful Transitions

Nancy shares two family examples of smooth transitions:

Direct Approach: “My mother-in-law just decided that she was uncomfortable with my father-in-law driving, so she started saying: ‘I’ll drive.’ and started driving all the time. Every now and then he would say: ‘Well, I can drive.’ and she would say: ‘Yeah, but I’m gonna drive.’ There wasn’t really any argument about it. Eventually she was the only one driving.”

Gradual Awareness Approach: “My dad had Parkinson’s for 25 years and my mother became uncomfortable with his driving. He kept backing into the mailbox when he left the driveway, so she started volunteering to drive. She’d drive his car some, her car some. After he hadn’t driven for over a year, it was time for us to buy my youngest son a car and she said, ‘You know, why don’t you just buy your father’s car?’ When she sat down to talk to my father about it she said, ‘You know, since you’re not driving anymore, would you be okay with us selling your car to Nancy for Adam?’ And he said, ‘I’m not driving anymore?’ He hadn’t driven for a year and didn’t even realize it.”

Keys to Successful Gradual Transition:

- Be patient and consistent.
- Use positive language and reasoning.
- Provide alternatives that maintain their independence.
- Acknowledge their feelings without arguing.
- Focus on the benefits of not driving rather than the limitations.

Taking Away the Keys

When gradual approaches don’t work, or when safety concerns become immediate, you may need to take more direct action to taking away the keys.



Recognizing When It's Time

Sometimes a specific incident makes it clear that driving must stop immediately.

Nancy shares her experience: "At this point, I was driving 80, 90% of the time. But one Saturday my husband really wanted to drive, so I let him. When we were not far out of our neighborhood, we got to a light and it turned red right when we got there. As it turns red, there's a pause in the traffic where the other light has not turned green yet. To my husband this was a moment where there was no traffic going, and he pulled right into the middle of the intersection."

She continues: "Horns are honking. I'm screaming (a lot). We got through it without having an accident, thank goodness. On Sunday he also insisted on driving. Two times before we even get to our stop, the exact same thing happens—left on red, out into the middle of a four-lane intersection. It was really scary and not pleasant for either one of us. So of course, I drove home and I told him, 'I'm sorry, but you're not going to be able to drive anymore,' He was very mad."

The Key Hiding Strategy

Step 1: Remove All Keys

- Hide the main car keys.
- Also find and hide all spare keys.
- Keep keys in your purse or somewhere they won't look.
- Don't make a big deal about taking them.

Step 2: Wait and Redirect

- Let them look for the keys naturally.
- Allow them to think the keys are simply misplaced.
- This works because losing things is most likely already a common experience.

The Car "Problem" Strategy

If they persist in looking for keys, create a car problem:

- **Wait for the Battery to Die:** This happens naturally if the car isn't used.
- **Disconnect the Battery:** Create the problem artificially.
- **"Discovery" of the Problem:** Act surprised when the car won't start.
- **Expensive "Repairs":** Suggest the car needs costly work and should be sold.

Important Considerations for Direct Removal:

- **Expect Resistance:** This approach often creates conflict initially.
- **Stay Calm:** Don't engage in arguments about the decision.
- **Be Consistent:** Don't give in to pressure to return keys.
- **Provide Alternatives:** Have transportation solutions ready.
- **Get Support:** Have family or friends ready to help with transportation.

Leaving Your Loved One Home Alone Safely

The ability to leave your loved one home alone safely is often a critical factor in maintaining their independence. However, this requires careful assessment and ongoing monitoring as abilities change.

Conducting Safety Audits

Regular audits help you track your loved one's changing abilities and identify when additional support might be needed.

Starting Your Audit System

Sue recommends a systematic approach: "The way I did the audit is I began tracking the changes by keeping a notebook. I would look at the different tasks they're doing and review how well are they able to do it. Where are they struggling with it? Are they struggling today, but maybe the next day they're not struggling? Starting to see patterns helps us understand what's happening."

Key Areas to Monitor

Household Management:

- **Laundry:** Can they wash, dry, and put away clothes? Are clothes clean?
- **Cleaning:** How well are they maintaining the house? Are they using cleaning products safely?
- **Meal Preparation:** Can they safely prepare, eat, and clean up after meals?

Personal Care:

- **Hygiene:** Are they bathing regularly and staying clean?
- **Clothing:** Are they dressing appropriately and changing clothes regularly?
- **Grooming:** Are they maintaining basic grooming habits?

Home Environment:

- **Stove and Oven:** Are they turning off appliances after use?
- **Refrigerator:** Are they keeping food properly stored?
- **Small Appliances:** Can they safely operate microwaves, coffee makers, etc.?
- **Mobility:** Are they bumping into things or tripping over rugs?
- **Thermostat:** Are they managing temperature controls appropriately?

Creating Documentation

Keep detailed records of your observations:

- **Date and Time:** When did you observe the issue?
- **Specific Behavior:** What exactly happened?
- **Pattern Recognition:** Is this a one-time event or recurring?



- **Solutions Tried:** What interventions have you attempted?
- **Effectiveness:** Did the solutions work?

Sue shares a concerning example: “In a caregiver support meeting, one of the caregivers was talking about the fact her husband had left the refrigerator door open all night long. In another meeting, a woman said her mom always loved to iron. One day the children came over and she had been ironing and she had left the iron on the ironing board face down - and still turned on.”

Early Intervention Strategies

Replace potentially dangerous items before problems occur:

- **Cleaning Products:** Switch to non-toxic alternatives.
- **Medications:** Secure all medications, including over-the-counter drugs.
- **Hazardous Materials:** Remove or secure anything that could be harmful if misused.

Sue emphasizes proactive replacement: “I’ve heard stories about someone cleaning the bathroom with products that are hazardous and then using them as hairspray. It’s important to make sure it is not even a part of the equation.”

Identifying Deal Breakers

Certain capabilities are essential for safe independent living. If your loved one can no longer manage these areas, they shouldn’t be left alone.

Deal Breaker #1: Food and Hydration

Nutritional Management:

- **Weight Loss:** Unexplained weight loss is an early warning sign.
- **Grocery Shopping:** Can they select and purchase appropriate food?
- **Meal Preparation:** Are they able to prepare and eat regular meals?
- **Food Safety:** Are they storing food properly and avoiding spoiled items?

Supporting Continued Independence: Nancy shares how friends are helping their father: “I’ve got some friends who are really working hard to keep their father at home independently. They realized he wasn’t effectively grocery shopping, he wasn’t really making his meals, but he could feed himself. They now have weekly delivery from their local grocery store. One of the sisters lives in the same city, so she makes pre-made meals, puts them in his freezer, and their father gets them out and heats them up. Periodically they’ll have meals delivered.”

Hydration Monitoring:

- **Daily Intake:** Ensure adequate fluid consumption throughout the day.
- **UTI Prevention:** Dehydration can lead to urinary tract infections.
- **Tracking Systems:** Use marked containers or counting systems.

Sue adds an important reminder: “Our brains are about 73% water, so we better keep them hydrated.”

Deal Breaker #2: Communication

Emergency Communication:

- **Phone Use:** Can they answer the phone and make calls?
- **911 Access:** Can they call for help in an emergency?
- **Technology Management:** Are they keeping devices charged and functional?

Regular Check-in Systems:

- **Daily Calls:** Establish consistent communication schedules.
- **Text Messages:** Simple daily check-ins.
- **Video Calls:** Visual confirmation of well-being.

Nancy describes a friend's system: "One of my friends doesn't talk to her mother every day. At the end of every night before she goes to bed, they have a text, and then the first thing in the morning, they have a text."

Camera and Intercom Systems: Nancy suggests a gradual approach: "I suggest that you begin to introduce cameras, indoor and outdoor, and that you make sure those cameras have intercoms. You can introduce cameras with the agreement that we'll only turn them on if we can't get in touch with you another way."

Benefits of Camera Systems:

- **Backup Communication:** Alternative when phones aren't working.
- **Visual Check-ins:** Ability to see that they're okay.
- **Emergency Monitoring:** Watch for falls or other emergencies.
- **Gradual Introduction:** Start with agreement for emergency use only.

Sue suggests framing it positively: "Have it be about you. When they want to maintain their own independence, you say, 'Okay, we want to make sure you're being safe and access to cameras will help us have peace of mind.'"

Deal Breaker #3: Medication Management

Essential Medication Tasks:

- **Recognition:** Can they identify their medications?
- **Timing:** Are they taking medications at the correct times?
- **Dosage:** Are they taking the right amounts?
- **Refills:** Can they manage prescription renewals?

Supporting Independence with Technology:

- **Pill Dispensers:** Automated systems with alarms.
- **Smartphone Apps:** Medication reminders and tracking.
- **Pharmacy Services:** Pre-packaged medication systems.
- **Family Monitoring:** Apps that alert caregivers to missed doses.



Visual Monitoring Example: Nancy shares how friends monitor their father: “Each of his adult children has a time that they check in with Dad and say, ‘Dad, have you taken your morning medication?’ It’s not just the check-in that’s critical, but where the medication is. The medication is in view of the camera so that they can watch him take his medication. Sometimes my friend says she’ll call and say, ‘Dad, did you take your lunch pills?’ And he says, ‘Yeah.’ And she can watch him on the camera walk over to where the pills are and take his pills.”

Tracking for Safety and Peace of Mind

Personal Tracking Devices

Multiple options are available for tracking your loved one:

- **Smartphone Tracking:** Built-in GPS features.
- **Wearable Devices:** Apple Watch with fall detection and GPS.
- **Specialized GPS Devices:** Purpose-built for seniors.
- **Shoe Inserts:** Discrete tracking options.



Multi-Purpose Safety Devices

Nancy recommends devices that serve multiple functions: “A friend of mine bought her mom an Apple Watch that allows them to track where she is, which is awesome, and it also has a fall detection feature. Do your research. There are a variety of multipurpose devices out there that really help manage more than one challenge.”

Building a Support Team

Creating Your Team

Sue emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive support network: “We want to make sure we’ve got a team of people who are available at different times of day, for different amounts of time, and different kinds of support.”

The Notebook System

Sue created a detailed information system: “I created a notebook with information about their medication schedules, dietary needs, emergency procedures, and backup people. I made sure they’ve got everything they need. I did go a little bit overboard—I even had a flashlight next to the notebook just in case the power went off.”

Essential Information to Include:

Sue created a detailed information system: “I created a notebook with information about their medication schedules, dietary

- **Medical Information:** Medications, dosages, doctor contacts.
- **Emergency Contacts:** Family, friends, neighbors, medical providers.
- **Daily Routines:** Normal schedules and preferences.
- **Special Instructions:** Specific care needs or preferences.
- **Access Information:** Keys, codes, security systems.

Team Member Requirements:

- **Keys or Access Codes:** Ability to enter the home if needed.
- **Emergency Training:** Basic knowledge of what to do in crisis situations.
- **Regular Communication:** Staying updated on changing needs.
- **Availability:** Coverage for different times and situations.

Long-Distance Considerations

For families managing care from a distance:

- **Local Contacts:** Neighbors or friends who can check in person.
- **Professional Services:** Home health aides or companion services.
- **Technology Solutions:** Cameras, monitoring systems, alert devices.
- **Emergency Plans:** Clear protocols for different scenarios.

Nancy notes: “For my friends whose father lives alone, if something happens and they can’t communicate with him, they’ve got a neighbor they can call who will walk over and see what’s going on.”

Managing Your Own Anxiety

Nancy acknowledges the emotional challenge: “Leaving someone with dementia at home alone can be a very unsettling situation. You want to make sure you put yourself in the best possible position to minimize your anxiety.”

This phase is temporary. With proper preparation and support systems, you can manage it successfully while preserving your loved one’s independence and your own peace of mind.

Creating Overall Home Safety

Home safety becomes increasingly important as dementia progresses, requiring a proactive approach that anticipates changing needs and capabilities.

Establishing Emergency Preparedness

File of Life System

Sue introduces this comprehensive emergency preparation tool: “The other thing to do is to get a File of Life document online. Fill out the information about your loved one, and then you fill one out for yourself, because sometimes the emergency could be with you.”

File of Life Components:

- **Personal Information:** Name, address, emergency contacts.
- **Medical Information:** Diagnoses, medications, allergies, doctors.
- **Personal Details:** Hobbies, interests, communication preferences.
- **Special Instructions:** How to best interact with your loved one.

Emergency Access System:

- **Front Door/Window Decal:** Alerts emergency responders to the File of Life.
- **Refrigerator Location:** Standard location for emergency information.
- **Professional Training:** Emergency teams know to look for this information.

Sue explains the benefit: “If the emergency team comes, they know information about File of Life is on the refrigerator and it’s very helpful to them.”

Registering with Emergency Services

Early registration provides crucial benefits:

- **Photo on File:** Emergency teams have current pictures.
- **Personal Information:** Nicknames, preferences, behavioral information.
- **Medical Details:** Current medications and medical conditions.
- **Quick Response:** Faster dispatch when you call for help.

Dementia-proofing Your Home

Kitchen Safety

The kitchen contains the most potential hazards and should be your first priority:

Supplies:

- **Remove or Lock Away:** All toxic cleaning products.
- **Cabinet Locks:** Childproof safety locks on cabinets.
- **Safe Alternatives:** Replace with non-toxic cleaning products.
- **Knives:** Store in locked drawers or remove from kitchen entirely.

Appliances:

- **Stove Controls:** Childproof stove knob covers for gas stoves.
- **Oven Locks:** Consider locks if they’re attempting to use the oven inappropriately.
- **Refrigerator Locks:** Available if opening/closing becomes problematic.
- **Refrigerator Chimes:** Alert systems for when doors are opened.

Garbage Management:

- **Childproof Locks:** Prevent access to garbage.
- **Disposal Switches:** Cover garbage disposal switches.



Whole House Safety Modifications

Room and Window Access:

- **Limited Access Areas:** Create safe zones for wandering.
- **Childproof Doorknob Covers:** Prevent access to rooms you don't want them to wander into.
- **Sash Lock Keys:** Prevent window opening.

Nancy shares her experience: “My husband would fidget with the window sash locks and unlock the window. When he unlocked a window, the top of the window would come down. I found myself regularly trying to get the window locked back up so that the cold air was not blowing in our house. Adding window sash locks solved this problem.”



Managing Fidgeting and Restlessness

Removing Tempting Items:

- **Lamps:** Reduce the number of accessible lamps.
- **Valuables:** Store precious items safely away.
- **Breakables:** Remove fragile decorative items.
- **Cash and Important Items:** Secure all valuable items.

Nancy's detective story: “We used to keep cash in one of our drawers. One day I saw the cash that morning, and later in the day, I went into that drawer and the cash was gone. I went back to the video history in the indoor camera and saw where he got into the drawer, saw him take the cash, watched through the other cameras in the other rooms, saw that he went back into the bedroom and then back into the closet. I went back into the closet and started searching. In his shoes—stuffed in the toe—was the money. Not just the money, his watch, one of his rings.”

Providing Appropriate Alternatives:

Sue's suggestion: “Replace those with children's toys. They're in a fidgeting stage. That's part of what's happening. The only things they have to entertain themselves with are the breakables and valuables and the lamps and the other things you have in their area that they're wandering in. Replace those with children's toys.”

Fidget-Friendly Options:

- **Children's Toys:** Large plastic toys that can't be easily broken.
- **Fidget Blankets:** Specially designed for people with dementia.
- **Sensory Items:** Different textures and materials to explore.
- **Puzzle Toys:** Age-appropriate mental stimulation.

Sue shares: “I got a fidget blanket. There's a dementia fidget blanket and I got one of those for Jack. We had several of them throughout his journey, and they are amazing. It's comforting for them. It has different textures and objects for them to engage with.”



Advanced Safety Concerns

Fireplace Safety:

- **Gas Fireplace Keys:** Remove and store safely.
- **Barriers:** Block access to fireplace areas.
- **Tool Removal:** Store fireplace tools safely.

Thermostat Control:

- **Covers:** Install covers that prevent temperature changes.
- **Programming:** Set automatic temperature controls.



Minimizing Fall Injuries

Understanding Fall Reality

Nancy provides realistic expectations: “Falling is inevitable, unfortunately. We’re going to do everything we can to minimize falling, while also recognizing the fact that it is most likely going to happen no matter what we do. Give yourself grace when it happens. Part of falling is depth perception and part of it is the person living with dementia becomes more unstable and begins to shuffle their feet.”

Environmental Modifications

Rug Removal: Sue’s early advice: “Watch out for the rugs because when a person starts to shuffle their feet, the rugs become a fall hazard. Roll those rugs up if you have area rugs and put them under a bed.”

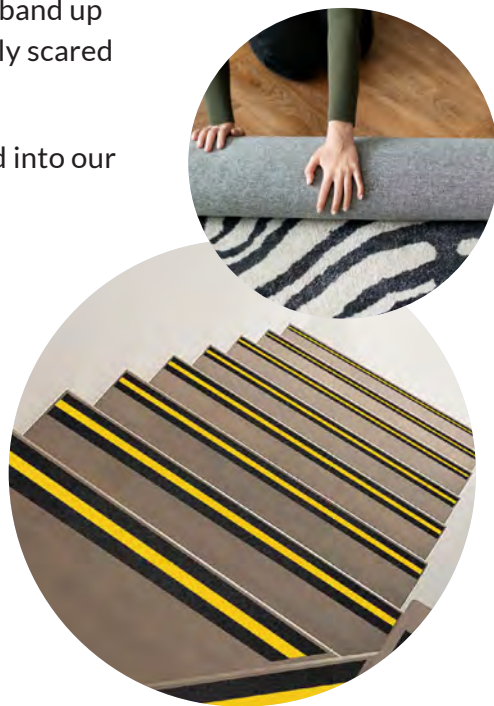
Nancy adds: “When incontinence starts, you’re going to be happy to have your rugs put away as well.”

Step Safety: Nancy’s depth perception discovery: “Depth perception definitely shows itself in a big way when it comes to steps. You could walk my husband up the steps, but don’t ask him to come back down because he is completely scared to death to come down the steps.”

Practical Step Solutions: Nancy’s paint solution: “The steps that lead into our garage from the house were painted gray, which is the same color as the garage floor. It felt like it took me as long to get my husband down those two steps than it took to drive to the doctor’s office. I bought white paint and painted a white strip on the end of each step. The next time he had to go into the garage, it was amazing to see his confidence walking down the steps.”

Alternative Step Markers:

- **Indoor Steps:** Reflective tape on step edges.
- **Contrasting Colors:** Make step edges clearly visible.
- **Consistent Lighting:** Ensure steps are well-lit.



Corner and Edge Protection

Nancy's regret: "I wish I'd known about padding anything with hard corners before my husband started falling."

Padding Solutions:

- **Corner Guards:** Soft padding for furniture corners.
- **Counter Edge Protection:** Padding along countertops.
- **Fireplace Hearth Protection:** Padding on top of the hearth.



Camera Discovery Example: Nancy shares how cameras helped identify a hazard: "One morning we noticed that my husband had a cut on his head. We were wondering, where did this cut come from? Using video history, I was able to go back and see that he had reached down to pick something up while he was wandering around the bedroom at night and when he came back up he hit the corner of one of the dressers in his room. We then knew to put the padding on the corner of that dresser."

Fall Detection and Response

Personal Tracking Devices: Sue explains the dual purpose: "Fall tracking devices serve a couple of applications. One application is with the ones that are physically on your loved one. You are able to make sure that you know where they are. Another application is they alert you to a fall."

Monitoring Systems:

- **Wearable Devices:** Automatic fall detection.
- **Camera Systems:** Visual monitoring of movement patterns.
- **Environmental Assessment:** Identify areas where falls are more likely.

When Falls Occur

Response Options:

- **Call 911:** For serious falls or when you can't help them up.
- **Person Lifts:** Mechanical devices to help lift someone safely.
- **Two-Person Assistance:** Having help available when possible.

Nancy's Person Lift Solution: "I got something called a person lift. It's almost like a dolly for a person. You scoot it up to their backside and you pull them onto it and you hook them with a belt and then you press the button and it lifts them up to chair height and then you undo the belt and he steps off of it. That thing was wonderful and it kept me from calling 911 every time my husband fell."



Bathroom Safety

Shower Challenges: Sue describes the progression: "As the journey goes on, just getting into the shower can become fearful for them. They don't want to get in. They see this as something that's frightening for them, and we can't get them into the shower."

Safety Modifications:

- **Grab Bars:** Strategically placed support rails.
- **Non-slip Surfaces:** Textured floor treatments.
- **Shower Chairs:** Seating options for stability.
- **Walk-in Showers:** Eliminate step-over barriers.

When Showers Become Impossible: Nancy's realization: "Eventually he wasn't going to take a shower anymore. There are a wide variety of fabulous products on the market that you can use to keep your loved one clean and they smell great. Why did I fight over the shower? Had someone told me upfront they're eventually not going to get in the shower, I would have saved both of us three or four months worth of agony fighting over the shower, which he won anyway."

Foot Safety:

- **Grip Socks:** Non-slip socks for around the house.
- **Proper Footwear:** Shoes with good traction.
- **Foot Coverage:** Never allow bare feet on potentially slippery surfaces.

Lighting for Fall Prevention

Sue emphasizes comprehensive lighting: "Looking at lighting, light things up like an airplane landing so that they're not going to have a lot of shadows. Look for any places where the lighting might be an issue."

Home safety is an ongoing process of observation and adjustment. What works today may need modification tomorrow as your loved one's condition changes.

Managing Wandering Safely

Wandering is one of the most concerning safety issues for dementia caregivers, affecting both outdoor safety and indoor management day and night.



Preventing Outside Wandering

Understanding the Scope of Outside Wandering

Nancy describes three types of concerning wandering: “When they’re leaving the house alone day or night, wandering in the house at night while we’re sleeping, and wandering in the house during the day.”

Five Strategies for Outside Wandering:

1. Use Your Community Network

Share the diagnosis early with neighbors and community members. When people know about the dementia, they can offer gentle guidance and help redirect your loved one home safely.

2. Implement Tracking Devices

Options include smartwatches, GPS devices, shoe inserts, or clothing tags. These provide peace of mind and quick location if they become lost.

3. Register with Emergency Services

Register early with emergency medical teams and police. Provide photos, personal details, medications, and behavioral information. When you call 911, they can immediately dispatch officers who already know your loved one.

4. Secure External Doors

Nancy’s lesson: After spending hundreds on locksmith deadbolts, she discovered childproof doorknob covers work just as well. “He has no idea how to open them. Had I known that, I could have saved a lot of money.”

5. Secure All Exit Points

Install keyed window sash locks to prevent window opening. For sliding doors, place a pole in the bottom track to prevent opening.



Managing Daytime Indoor Wandering

Understanding Indoor Wandering

Unlike early stages when you can redirect them, wandering becomes purposeless movement that’s difficult to redirect. The best approach is ensuring they can wander safely.

Three Key Strategies:

1. Safety-Proof Wandering Areas

Use childproof doorknob covers to limit room access while removing hazards from areas where they can wander safely.

2. Create Safe Zones

Designate specific areas where wandering is safe. Remove breakables, secure dangerous items, and ensure clear pathways.

3. Use Monitoring Technology

Install cameras or use baby monitors to observe wandering patterns and ensure safety without constant supervision.



Managing Nighttime Wandering

Understanding Nighttime Challenges

Sleep pattern disruptions often accompany wandering. The same restlessness that causes daytime wandering typically spills over into nighttime.

Four Nighttime Strategies:

1. Address Sleep Issues

Work with medical teams on sleep medications. Start with over-the-counter options and progress to prescription medications as needed through trial and error.

2. Limit Nighttime Access

- Allow access to bedroom and bathroom only.
- Consider childproof doorknob covers on inside of bedroom doors with ensuite bathrooms.
- Use pet gates to create safe pathways while blocking dangerous areas.
- Keep bathroom lights on for easy navigation.

3. Monitor Without Exhaustion

- **Motion Detectors:** Alert when they get out of bed.
- **Baby Monitors:** Simple audio/video monitoring.
- **Camera Systems:** Visual confirmation without getting up constantly.

4. Address Safety Concerns

Using gates and restrictions isn't cruel—it's necessary for safety. Caregivers need sleep to provide good care, and it's not sustainable for anyone to wander the house all night.

Stair Safety: Depth perception issues make stairs particularly dangerous. Use pet gates or install locked doors to prevent stair access, as people with dementia may be able to go up but struggle coming down.

The Safety Philosophy: When discussing wandering, the focus is always safety. The goal is balancing maximum safe freedom with necessary restrictions while preserving dignity and ensuring caregiver sustainability

Final Thoughts: You've Got This

Safety concerns in dementia care can feel overwhelming. With preparation, the right tools, and a systematic approach, you can successfully navigate each challenge as it arises.

What We've Learned Together

Throughout this guide, we've walked through the major safety considerations you'll face on your caregiving journey:

The Progressive Nature of Safety Needs: Safety isn't a one-time concern—it evolves as your loved one's condition changes. From the early worries about driving to the later challenges of wandering and home modifications, each stage builds on the previous one.

The Importance of Flexibility: What works today may not work tomorrow. The most effective caregivers are those who remain flexible, observing their loved one's changing needs and adjusting their approach accordingly.



Key Principles to Remember

Safety First, Independence Second, Both Matter: Your primary responsibility is keeping your loved one safe. Preserving their dignity and independence whenever possible makes the journey better for everyone.

Gradual Changes Work Better: Whether it's transitioning from driving to riding along, or slowly introducing safety equipment, gradual changes are typically better accepted than sudden restrictions.

Technology Can Be Your Friend: From tracking devices to cameras to automated medication dispensers, modern technology offers tools that can extend safe independence while giving you peace of mind.

Community Support Makes a Difference: Don't try to handle everything alone. Whether it's neighbors who watch out for wandering, friends who provide transportation, or professional services that assist with care, building a support network is essential.

Moving Forward with Confidence

Start Where You Are: Start with the safety concerns that are most relevant to your current situation and build from there.

Trust Your Instincts: You know your loved one better than anyone. If something feels unsafe to you, trust that instinct and take action to address it.

Ask for Help: Whether it's from family members, friends, professional caregivers, or support groups, don't hesitate to ask for help when you need it—and say “YES” when they offer support.

Take Care of Yourself: You can't provide good care or make wise safety decisions if you're exhausted or overwhelmed. Your well-being matters too.

Be Patient with the Process: Some safety transitions take time, and there may be setbacks along the way. This is normal and doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong.

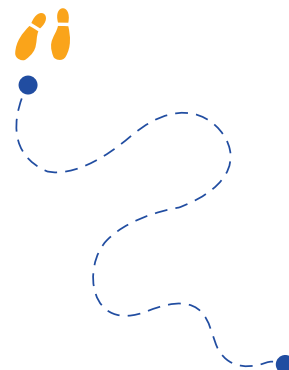
The Bigger Picture

While safety is crucial, remember the goal isn't to eliminate all risk—it's to minimize serious dangers while preserving as much normalcy and dignity as possible. Every day your loved one can remain safe while maintaining some independence is a victory worth celebrating.

The journey isn't easy, but you're not walking it alone. Thousands of families have faced these same challenges and found ways to navigate them successfully. With the strategies in this guide, the support of others who understand, and your own strength and dedication, you can handle whatever safety challenges come your way.

Sue and Nancy's experiences, along with those of countless other caregivers, prove that while the path may be difficult, it's absolutely manageable with the right tools, preparation, and mindset.

“We're all on this journey together.”



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