

9 Winter Weather Tips For People Living With Alzheimer's

Cold weather can pose health challenges for everyone. But people living with Alzheimer's disease, or a related dementia have a higher risk of some health hazards when temperatures get low.

Here are nine potential cold weather hazards, and some techniques people living with Alzheimer's and their care partners can use to try to avoid them.



Hypothermia

Older people are more susceptible to hypothermia, which is when a person's body temperature drops to a dangerous level. Dementia can compound the risk, as a person might forget to dress appropriately for frigid weather.

- Stay indoors as much as possible during freezing weather.
- Keep indoor temperature above 68° F.
- Stay dry.
- Wear layers of clothing including hats, gloves, and scarves.



Frostbite

Older people with Alzheimer's are also at higher risk of heart disease or other circulatory problems—conditions that can compound the risk of frostbite. Frostbite occurs when extreme cold causes damage to the skin that can go all the way to the bone.

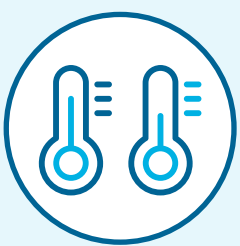
- Wear warm layered clothing outside, including covering head, face, neck, and hands.
- Stay indoors as much as possible during freezing weather.
- Run affected skin under warm, never hot, water.



Falls

Icy weather can increase the risk of falls, which are the leading cause of injury for adults over 65. People with Alzheimer's can also experience loss of balance or coordination, increasing the risks of a dangerous fall.

- Keep steps and walkways clear of ice and snow.
- Wear boots with non-skid soles.
- If you use a cane, consider adding an "ice grip" to the tip.



Cold Indoor Temperatures

People living with dementia may not be able to recognize or communicate if they are cold. Prolonged exposure to cold temperature can lead to a host of health challenges including death.

- Set the thermostat to 68 degrees or higher (you can close-off unused rooms to save on heating costs).
- Dress in warm layers, including socks and slippers.
- Put seasonally inappropriate clothing like shorts or t-shirts away to simplify outfit selection.



Inactivity

Short days and unwelcoming weather can lead to inactivity which increases risks of depression, anxiety, and circulation problems.

- Find opportunities to move indoors—walking, chair exercises, marching in place.
- Try exercise videos created especially for people with dementia.
- Maintain regular meal and snack schedules to encourage movement and nutrition.



Wandering

Alzheimer's causes people to lose their ability to identify places, so getting lost can happen at any stage of the disease. Wandering is common and dangerous during any season, but harsh winters can increase the risk.

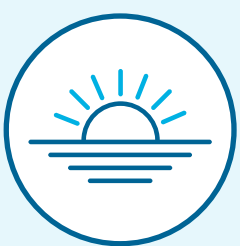
- Identify times wandering is most likely to happen (often in early evening) and plan structured activities during this time.
- Ensure all basic needs—toileting, food, and hydration—are met.
- Don't leave someone with dementia alone in unfamiliar surroundings.



Unsafe Heating Sources

Alzheimer's disease can impair judgment, sometimes leading to risky behaviors. This could lead someone with dementia to use unsafe methods to keep warm.

- Never use ovens or stovetops to heat a room. Consider adding safety covers to knobs if necessary.
- Keep space heaters clear of flammable objects.
- Install carbon monoxide and smoke detectors, possibly detectors with monitoring features that can alert emergency services.



Lack of Natural Light

Winter's shorter days lead to a lack of sunlight, which can increase confusion, anxiety, and depression in people living with Alzheimer's.

- Keep curtains and drapes open during daylight hours and position a favorite chair near a window.
- Install timers to bulbs and lamps to create a clear day-to-night cycle.
- Consider purchasing a light therapy lamp.



Driving

Some people with very mild Alzheimer's may be able to drive in some conditions, while people with moderate to severe Alzheimer's shouldn't get behind the wheel. Regardless of the stage of their disease, ice, snow, and cold increases the risk of accidents or getting lost, which in turn can lead to exposure to dangerous temperatures.

- If a person with Alzheimer's insists on driving, hide the keys, move the car, take out the distributor cap, or disconnect the battery.
- Contact your local Area Agency on Aging to learn about alternate transportation options.
- Ensure that all daily needs are met to decrease the need to run errands.

Do you think you, or someone you care about, may be experiencing symptoms of Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia this winter? Don't wait; talk to your Primary Care Provider about your concerns. They may decide that a referral to Georgia Memory Net for accurate, accelerated diagnosis is the right next step.

To learn more about getting a referral, **visit gamemorynet.org/patient/patient-referrals**
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