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Micha Shalev

By Micha Shalev

Caring for a loved one who has Alzheimer's can be rewarding – and stressful. Home safety is important for everyone – but it carries added significance for caregivers. This is especially true if you're caring for a loved one who has Alzheimer's disease in your home. A throw rug or a stray toy on the steps could easily put your loved one at risk of a fall or injury.

To prevent stressful and dangerous situations, consider these home safety tips for caregivers:

Evaluating home safety

Start by thinking about your loved one's behavior, abilities and health. Can your loved one safely use stairs? Does he or she wander or get up at night? Has he or she fallen before? Then check each room for potential hazards and make a note of changes you'd like to make. Keep in mind that changing the environment will likely be more effective than trying to change your loved one's behavior.

Bathroom safety tips

In the bathroom:

- Install a shower chair and grab bars. Place grab bars near the toilet, near the bath tub and in the shower. A hand-held shower head also might be useful.
- Address slippery surfaces. Place nonskid strips or a mat in the bath tub and shower. Unless the bathroom is carpeted, place nonskid strips on the floor near the bath tub, shower, toilet and sink, too.
- Use a faucet cover in the bath tub. A foam rubber faucet cover can help prevent serious injury if your loved one falls.
- Lock up potentially hazardous products or electrical appliances. Install childproof latches on cabinets and drawers to limit access to potentially dangerous items. Use child-restraint caps on medication containers.
- Reduce water temperature. Set the thermostat on your hot water heater to below 120 F (48.9 C).
- Remove door locks. Consider removing locks from the bathroom doors to prevent your loved one from accidentally locking himself or herself in.

Caregivers must take prudent measures to ensure the safety of the person with Alzheimer's disease. Areas of special concern include falls, wandering, ingesting harmful materials, misuse of tools, equipment and material, and other factors which threaten the safety of the person with Alzheimer's disease.

Additional point of alert

1. Falls can be precipitated by the effects of Alzheimer's as well as other coexisting health problem. Medications, lack of sleep, and inattentiveness can be problematic. Sudden falling should be evaluated by the person's physician. Furniture, electrical cords, loose scatter rugs, change in levels, or poor lighting may all contribute to the likelihood of falling. Correct and be alert to these dangers.

2. Wandering is a serious safety issue for long-term care facility staff as well as family members while caring for a loved one at home. The person who wanders away from the facility or home may be in danger from traffic, harmful weather conditions, hazards such as stray dogs, residential pools and other unsafe areas. The person may become confused and frightened and unable to ask for help or find his way back.
3. Ingesting materials that are detrimental to the person's health is another area of concern. Patients/residents will sometimes eat or drink things that look inviting, i.e., shampoo, cleaning solvents, or finger nail polish remover, but which could potentially cause great physical harm. Even materials which do not look inviting may be ingested, i.e., cigarette butts, pebbles from the fish tank. Be alert, also, to such things as poisonous plants, especially those with pretty berries, small pieces in a puzzle, or small items in a sorting activity, i.e., buttons, nuts or coins.
4. Tools, equipment and materials used in activities and craft projects must be chosen and monitored with care. The person may no longer have good judgement in how to use such items.
5. Environmental stresses which increase the likelihood of accidents include noise (TV, radio, intercom, yelling and screaming of other residents), too much stimulation from competing activities, unpleasant smells, and lack of physical or psychological structure. The most therapeutic environment for the memory-impaired person is one which offers a calm, routine atmosphere.
6. Environmental hazards include congested traffic areas; highly polished floors which are too slippery, especially when wet, and which also give off a glare; clothing that is too short/too long.

Micha Shalev, MHA CDP CDCM CADDCT, is the owner of The Oasis at Dodge Park, Dodge Park Rest Home and The Adult Day Club at Dodge Park located at 101 and 102 Randolph Road in Worcester. He is a graduate of the National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners program, and a well-known speaker covering Alzheimer's and dementia training topics. He can be reached at 508-853-8180 or by email at m.shalev@dodgepark.com or view more information online at www.dodgepark.com.

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* The new Tax Reduction Act of 2005 mandated that seniors spend-down all of their combined assets before the sick spouse can qualify into a nursing home. The act requires a 5-year look back for any transfers by seniors designed to deprive the state of those available resources to pay for the nursing home. In a Rest Home setting it is only 1 year look back!!!

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