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Wandering and Elopement in Nursing Homes: What to Know

When nursing home residents wander away, there can be deadly consequences. Learn how to ensure your loved one is safe.

 By Elaine K. Howley | March 29, 2024

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This article is based on reporting that features expert sources.



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Wandering around a new town and exploring as a tourist can be a lot of fun. And for some, eloping is the answer to being with their beloved forever.

In the context of nursing homes, however, the terms “wandering” and “elopement” have very different meanings and can have negative outcomes.

In this article, we’ll explain what you need to know about these potentially dangerous problems.

Key Takeaways:

- Wandering occurs when a senior living resident roams about a space, potentially invading others’ privacy.
- Elopement refers to a resident leaving the premises. About one-third of elopements end in death, according to research.
- Both wandering and elopement occur more often in those with dementia.
- Facilities can prevent wandering and elopement by staying attentive to residents’ needs, putting safety guardrails in place, ensuring staffing levels are high and training staff members to properly identify and reduce elopement risk.

What’s the Difference Between Wandering and Elopement?

While wandering and elopement sound similar, there are some nuances between the two.

Wandering

Wandering occurs when “a resident of a skilled nursing facility, dementia community, assisted living, retirement home or other senior living community meanders around the space, often intruding upon others’ privacy and irritating them,” explains Dr. Elizabeth Landsverk, a geriatrician based in the San Francisco area.

Wandering is natural and typically harmless when it’s supervised and contained in a safe environment, adds Dr. Alvaro Pascual-Leone, chief medical officer and co-founder of Linus Health, a Boston-based digital cognitive assessment platform. It can, for instance, relieve boredom and provide an outlet for exercise.

Elopement

Elopement, on the other hand, refers to a resident leaving the premises.

“Elopement is when a wandering resident leaves a safe environment, leading to what is known as ‘critical wandering’ or a ‘missing incident,’ which is when the whereabouts of a resident are unknown and their safety is at serious risk,” says Pascual-Leone, who also serves as medical director of the Deanna and Sidney Wolk Center for Memory Health at Hebrew SeniorLife and as a professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School.

In some cases, elopement can have tragic consequences.

“Unfortunately, when nursing facility residents with dementia do elope, the results can be catastrophic,” Pascual-Leone says, pointing to a 2011 retrospective study of 325 newspaper reports of people with dementia missing in the community.

The study determined that 32% of elopement incidents included in those reports ended in death, otherwise known as fatal elopement.

In 2023, the Washington Post reported that since 2018, more than 2,000 people have wandered away from assisted living and memory care units or had been left unattended outside. Nearly 100 of those people died, Pascual-Leone adds.

The dementia factor

Wandering and elopement tend to be common in people who have dementia, as noted in the research above.

“Individuals with dementia often feel compelled to walk about,” Pascual-Leone explains.

According to a study in the *Annals of Long-Term Care*, an estimated 31% of nursing home residents and between 25% and 70% of community-dwelling older adults with dementia wander at least once.

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Risks of Nursing Home Elopement

Wandering or elopement rarely just happens.

“While it may seem to family and friends that their loved one is walking without a purpose, it is important to remember that there is always a reason behind the person’s walking, even if it is not obvious, they can’t tell you or they have forgotten about it,”

explains Daisy Slavkova, a registered general manager at Loveday Kensington, a memory care community in central London.

Common triggers of wandering and elopement can include:

- A desire to go home, even if the facility is their current home.
- Stress or discomfort in a situation or environment.
- Pain.
- Disorientation.
- Forgetting where they were intending to go.
- Searching for a lost item.
- Lack of sleep.
- Loneliness.
- Boredom.
- A need to release pent-up or excess energy.
- Hunger.
- Incorrect or overuse of certain medications.

The risk level of wandering can vary depending on the type and stage of dementia the individual has, Landsverk says.

"A person with vascular dementia who can no longer take care of themselves and will tend to forget new information in mere minutes may retain periods of self-awareness, at which times they become adamant that they should not be living in such a facility," she explains. "Such individuals are more likely than others to wander off the premises if they are not in appropriately secured communities."

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What Should Nursing Homes Do to Prevent Elopement?

Nursing homes have a few ways to reduce the risk of elopement, including:

- Creating a safe area for seniors to roam about.

- Providing exercise activities.
- Engaging seniors with stimulating activities that reduce loneliness.
- Ensuring adequate staffing levels so seniors' needs are met in a timely fashion.
- Training staff to identify and reduce elopement risk.

Staff at the facility should also take note of patterns that develop, Slavkova says.

"For example, I had an experience with a resident who would get distressed and walk up and down the corridor at specific times of the day," she recalls. "We learned from her family that the time of the event was the time when, as a young mother, she would pick (up) her children from school. All we had to do is to reassure the resident that the children had been already picked up by her husband, and she would settle."

Silver Alert

Nursing homes can also take advantage of Silver Alerts. These alerts can broadcast information about missing people, particularly those with dementia or cognitive impairment. Silver Alert laws may mandate that adults with dementia be treated as missing persons regardless of how long they've been missing.

"Silver Alert laws and local programs may also include registries of people who have eloped in the past," Pascual-Leone says. "The registries are maintained by law enforcement and include information such as date of birth, medical condition and caregivers' phone numbers. They may also include a recent photo, physical description of the person and description of the person's favorite places to visit."

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How to Ensure Your Loved One Is Safe in a Nursing Home

Making sure your loved one is safe means you and the care team may need to be vigilant. Among the actions you can take are:

- Getting early cognitive screenings for your loved one. Wandering may crop up in the middle or later stages of dementia, Pascual-Leone says, but it can also be an early sign of cognitive impairment.

- Moving your loved one into a facility that's specifically designed to provide a safe, memory-supportive environment. Staff in these facilities are required to be trained and licensed and must update their training every year, Landsverk says.
- Checking facility protocols, including what safety processes are in place.
- Checking that there is adequate staffing. During the initial move-in, for instance, when a resident may be struggling to adjust to an unfamiliar environment, facilities may increase staffing a 1-to-1 caregiver-to-resident ratio.

Other measures to improve security and reduce the risk of a tragic outcome include:

- Perimeter access control.
- Fire alarm and detection systems.
- In-room patient monitoring.
- Nightly checks of all windows and doors to make sure they are secured.
- Specialized access control in memory care units.

Technology can help with some of these, but even "some simple interventions such as painting the exit door to look like a bookcase can dissuade a person with dementia from trying to exit," Landsverk says.

The Bottom Line

If your loved one has wandered, it may signal they need to move more or have an unmet need that's demanding attention.

"Trying to restrain or restrict the mobility of the person will tend to make matters worse and lead to distress and behavioral problems," Pascual-Leone points out. "Instead, ensure your loved one's basic needs are met, maintain a daily routine and structure and limit daytime napping if the wandering/elopement occurs at night. Contact local law enforcement to learn if they have Silver Alert registries, and give them your loved one's information and a recent photo, just in case."

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