

Home Safety for Alzheimer's Caregivers: Sensory Impairment

Information from the National Institute on Aging



Alzheimer's disease can cause changes in the ability to interpret what a person can see, hear, taste, feel, or smell, even though his or her sense organs may still be intact. The person with Alzheimer's should be evaluated periodically by a physician for any such changes that may be correctable with glasses, dentures, hearing aids, or other treatments.

Vision

People with Alzheimer's disease (AD) may experience a number of changes in visual abilities. For example, they may lose their ability to comprehend visual images. Although there is nothing physically wrong with their eyes, people with AD may no longer be able to interpret accurately what they see due to changes in their brain. Also, their sense of perception and depth may

be altered. These changes can cause safety concerns.

- Create color contrast between floors and walls to help the person see depth. Floor coverings are less visually confusing if they are a solid color.
- Use dishes and placemats in contrasting colors for easier identification.
- Mark the edges of steps with brightly colored strips of tape to outline changes in elevation.
- Place brightly colored signs or simple pictures on important rooms (the bathroom, for example) for easier identification.
- Be aware that a small pet that blends in with the floor or lies in walkways may be a hazard. The person with AD may trip over a small pet.

Smell

A loss or decrease in smell often accompanies Alzheimer's disease.

- Install good quality smoke detectors and check them frequently. The person with AD may not smell smoke or may not associate it with danger.
- Keep refrigerators clear of spoiled foods.

Touch

People with AD may experience loss of sensation or may no longer be able to interpret feelings of heat, cold, or discomfort.

- Adjust water heaters to 120 degrees to avoid scalding tap water. Most hot water heaters are set at 150 degrees, which can cause burns.
- Color code separate water faucet handles, with red for hot and blue for cold.
- Place a sign on the oven, coffee maker, toaster, crockpot, iron, or other potentially hot appliances that says DO NOT TOUCH or STOP! VERY HOT. The person with AD should not use appliances without supervision. Unplug appliances when not in use.
- Remove furniture or other objects with sharp corners or pad them to reduce potential for injury.

Taste

People with AD may lose taste sensitivity. As their judgment declines, they also may place dangerous or inappropriate things in their mouth.

- Keep all condiments such as salt, sugar, or spices away from easy access if you see the person with AD using excess amounts. Too much salt, sugar, or spice can be irritating to the stomach or cause other health problems.
- Remove or lock up medicine cabinet items such as toothpaste, perfume, lotions, shampoos, rubbing alcohol, or soap, which may look and smell like edible items to the person with AD.

- Consider a childproof latch on the refrigerator, if necessary.
- Keep the poison control number by the telephone. Keep a bottle of Ipecac (vomit inducing) available, but use only with instructions from poison control or 911.
- Keep pet litter boxes inaccessible to the person with AD. Do not store pet food in the refrigerator.
- Learn the Heimlich maneuver or other techniques to use in case of choking. Check with your local Red Cross chapter for more information and instruction.

Hearing

People with AD may have normal hearing, but they may lose their ability to interpret what they hear accurately. This may result in confusion or over-stimulation.

- Avoid excessive noise in the home such as having the stereo and the TV on at the same time.
- Be sensitive to the amount of noise going on outside, and close windows or doors, if necessary.
- Avoid large gatherings of people in the home if the person with AD shows signs of agitation or distress in crowds.
- Check hearing aid batteries and functioning frequently.

This article is an excerpt from the National Institute on Aging's Home Safety for People with Alzheimer's Disease. For more suggestions and information about for caregivers of persons with Alzheimer's or other dementia, visit the NIA website at www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers.