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Q & A's Regarding Dementia and the Summer:

Q: The warm summer weather is enticing to my loved one with memory loss, dementia, or Alzheimer's disease. What steps can I take as a caregiver to ensure he does not wander outside into a potentially dangerous situation?

A: One way to prevent someone with memory loss from wandering outside is to get the agitation and restlessness out of his system before he decides to leave unannounced. Encouraging movement throughout the day suggests that he does not need to leave the house to feel like he is physically active. Engage him in daily activities around the house such as setting the table or folding laundry, but make sure he is supervised.

Another simple measure to prevent wandering is to physically lock the door from the inside with either a bolt or a chain lock. Camouflaging the door knob to the color of the door itself may also be an effective way of deterring your loved one from exiting the home.

Also, consider informing neighbors about the condition of your loved one. The more people who know the situation, the more likely someone will notice and help if he wanders.

Q: Many summer activities – such as having barbecues, watching fireworks, or going to a baseball game – often involve being surrounded by large crowds of people and lots of noise. Are these activities still appropriate for my loved one with dementia?

A: What is appropriate varies depending on the individual, so a good first step is to determine what activities your loved one can handle. Ease her into the situation—tell her beforehand what to expect and reassure her throughout the event if she becomes anxious. Even a seemingly comfortable event like a family reunion can be painstaking for an individual with memory loss, because she cannot remember names of very familiar faces.

If she is able to handle a crowded or noisy environment such as a baseball game or a fireworks display, use the buddy system to make sure she is always being supervised. It is common for people with dementia to behave in slightly inappropriate ways, such as undressing in public or shoplifting, so maintaining a sense of humor will not only make the person with dementia more comfortable, but will also keep you as a caregiver in better spirits as you handle the situation.

Of course, if your loved one is no longer able to handle public events, do not completely cut out fun pastimes. Find ways to enjoy these events without the loudness or the large crowds, such as watching fireworks displays from the TV or from inside a car, or picnicking during less busy hours.

Q: When is it appropriate for me to check on my elderly neighbors during the summer?

A: If you are aware that your neighbor has Alzheimer's disease or some other condition of memory loss, you are being a great citizen in exhibiting concern for him/her! An easy thing you can do to be more vigilant is to keep your blinds open so that you can possibly catch movement when a senior is wandering outside. If you are concerned about a neighbor, make a friendly gesture – such as taking in her trash or mail or watering her lawn – an excuse to check in on her.

Q: My loved one refuses to drink water on his own and I am concerned about dehydration in the summer heat. What can I do to encourage him to drink more?

A: It is very common for people with dementia to resist drinking water. An important, though difficult, part of combating this is simply continuous insistence that they hydrate themselves. Keep bringing them water throughout the day, and have a glass yourself to encourage them to drink. If your loved one has trouble remembering to fill up his glass throughout the day, consider leaving glasses of water around the house so that he will see them and drink them rather than accidentally go without it. If this isn't working, try offering your loved one a hydrating treat such as a popsicle.