

Walking to Wellness



Exercise for Physical and Emotional Health Second Edition

Participant Workbook: Caregiver Walking Together

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This document can be downloaded at <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16/walking-to-wellness-manuals.asp>.

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Caregiver Walking Together

Caregiver Walking Together With a Person Who Has Cognitive Impairment or Dementia

Millions of adults today are caring for someone who has cognitive impairment or dementia. These conditions cause problems with thinking, organizing and remembering, and cause care recipients to become dependent upon the help of others.

The information we provide here can help caregivers share physical activity, especially walking, with a care recipient who has cognitive impairment or dementia. We try to provide information that will be good for health and help to maintain a positive emotional connection between the caregiver and care recipient.

Why Walking is Good for Caregivers and Care Recipients

You may be wondering why physical activities like walking would be important for caregivers and persons with cognitive impairment or dementia. It may seem like only one more thing to consider when life is already stressful. Here is why. Most people already know that regular physical activity like walking has many beneficial effects on physical and emotional health. We now know that there are also effects on the body and brain that may help make daily life better for caregivers and care recipients.

One of simplest ways *Caregiver Walking Together* can help is to give caregivers and care recipients a time to be together that is not hurried or pressured. This kind of “time



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out” can be especially good when they can go outdoors for a change of scenery—if weather permits and it is safe. Depending on the abilities of the care recipient, they may be able to talk, observe nature, and have short conversations that both can enjoy. If memory and verbal communication become limited for care recipients, they often are still able to understand and respond to the emotional part of the experience. They may not remember specifically watching children at play or admiring flowers blooming in a neighbor’s yard, but they feel happy after spending a special time together.

Another important benefit of regular physical activity is that it makes people stronger so they don’t get tired as easily. They have more energy for whatever they need to do. Older people who are active are less likely to fall, which is a major worry for many people. Regular activity can make life more comfortable by helping prevent constipation. And, along with exposure to bright light during the day, exercise helps people sleep better. This is important because persons with dementia and cognitive impairment may develop changes in their sleep and wake times that make it hard for the caregiver to get enough rest, as well. Improved sleep for the caregiver can help them to better manage the daily challenges.

Because physical activity stimulates many healthy changes in the brain, researchers have been trying to learn whether regular exercise can slow down or reverse the problems with thinking, organizing, and remembering in persons with cognitive impairment or



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dementia. We don't yet know the answers to those questions. Some studies have found small improvements, but others have not found any differences between people who exercise and people who spend the same amount of time socializing or doing other activities.

Coping With Challenges to Walking With Care Recipients

The changes in the brain of persons with cognitive impairment and dementia can affect them in ways that make walking with someone more challenging. Knowing about these changes can help caregivers plan their time walking together with care recipients to make it work out better and be more pleasant for both.

Many things we take for granted can become confusing or more difficult for a person with dementia or cognitive impairment. They may not seem to be interested or motivated to go out for a walk, even though they seem to enjoy it once they get out and do it. They may need someone to help them remember it is time to go and to choose the place to walk. They may not be able to follow through with all the steps needed to get ready.

Some will only need reminders when they get stuck or distracted, but others may need much more assistance, including choosing clothing and shoes appropriate for the



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weather and activity. They may not remember to put on sunscreen and a hat if needed. A reminder to use the toilet before leaving home can help prevent accidents. Both caregivers and care recipients need to drink enough fluids, especially water, and not wait until they become thirsty.

Routines are usually very helpful for caregivers and care recipients for many reasons. When they walk together as a routine on a regular schedule, caregivers can notice if the care recipient suddenly loses interest or doesn't want to go. This can be an important way for the care recipient to communicate that they are not feeling well, are experiencing pain, upset, or afraid of something.

Persons with dementia and cognitive impairment may have more difficulty walking on uneven surfaces and may be distracted or at risk of injury if trying to walk where the area is crowded with other people, bicyclists, or cars and traffic. Their walking pace may be slow. Noisy places may be upsetting and limit caregivers' ability to talk gently with care recipients to help keep them oriented and at ease.

They may not remember the names of neighbors or friends who meet them and stop to chat. They may not remember that they saw this person yesterday or they may mistake them for someone else. They may have trouble talking or communicating except for facial expressions. For some care recipients, there could be a danger of getting lost if they are separated from their caregiver and have no identification.



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Knowing about these possible concerns can help caregivers plan ahead and prevent problems in order to make walking together a time for sharing positive times together. The tip sheet *Caregiver Walking Together* on page 6 summarizes some suggestions to help cope with the special challenges that may be experienced as well as to appreciate the emotional benefits of the activity.

Other Activities You May Want to Try

Walking is not the only activity that can be very helpful to caregivers and persons with dementia or cognitive impairment. Listening and moving to music is another very enjoyable and healthy activity. You can do it indoors and for only a few minutes at a time to get some of the same benefits as walking. You may also find local classes, or internet or television programs, with exercises designed especially for caregivers and care recipients.



Tip Sheet: Caregiver Walking Together

Walking Together With a Person Who has Dementia or Cognitive Impairment

These tips can help caregivers walk for physical and emotional benefits with a care recipient who has dementia or cognitive impairment.

1. Make walking together a routine activity, most days if possible. Care recipients may be able to learn the routine and require less assistance with the steps required. Frequent walking helps ensure more health benefits. If care recipients suddenly resist walking they seemed to like, this can alert caregivers to figure out what has changed.
2. Prompt the care recipient as needed to help them with the steps required to get ready, including proper dress, sturdy and comfortable walking shoes, sun protection, hydration, and using the toilet before going out. Repeat prompts when needed, but don't hurry. Wait to see if the care recipient responds and let them do whatever they can on their own.
3. Choose a place to walk that does not have a lot of traffic, noise, unleashed dogs, crowds, uneven walking surfaces, or other environmental distractions or dangers.
4. Try to keep communications cheerful and positive; avoid arguing or inviting possible negative responses. Say, "It's time to go for our walk" instead of "Do you want to go for a walk?" Or, "Do you want to wear the green jacket or the red sweater?" instead of "What do you want to wear?"
5. Set a pace that is slow enough for the care recipient to keep up comfortably. You are moving for health and wellness, not hurrying to go somewhere.
6. Notice if the care recipient is able to walk and talk at the same time. Walking too fast or uphill might cause some shortness of breath which makes it hard to talk, but



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cognitive impairment can also make it difficult for the brain to manage movement and conversation at the same time.

7. Keep the conversation simple and light while walking. Don't use the walking time to complain or think about problems. Give your mind and body a time out from all the stresses and demands of the day. Appreciate the moment; walk through one moment at a time.
8. Walking outdoors can be especially refreshing when weather permits and it is safe. Maybe you can watch birds building a nest, plants and flowers growing, or children playing in your neighborhood. Perhaps you can visit a setting with natural beauty, such as a park, a nature trail, or a neighborhood with trees and flowers.
9. Carry a water bottle or juice if needed to maintain hydration for you and your care recipient.
10. Help with social situations as necessary. For example, you can greet your neighbors and friends by name to help orient your care recipient.
11. An identification bracelet and/or name labels in clothing is advised for care recipients if there is a possibility that they could be separated or wander away and get lost.
12. Before starting out, take a few deep breaths and relax for a moment to let go of whatever stresses are on your mind and to set a positive mood for this new activity.
13. While walking together, keep in mind the good advice, "Laughter is the best medicine". Be positive, smile and laugh, and the care recipient will often respond happily by smiling and laughing with you.



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