

Take a Hike - or Simply a Walk

Walking is a good dementia strategy for living with dementia. Walking as an aerobic exercise has been associated with improved memory performance and reduced hippocampal atrophy¹. If walking is done with strength training there is even improvement in the tasks of daily living: dressing, eating, bathing, toileting, walking.² Walking together, as care companions, has been associated with a reduction in the caregiver's feeling of burden, and distress as well as an increase in effective sleep, a sense of well-being and self-efficacy.^{3, 4}

However, an individual with dementia is less likely to do physical activity than a healthy individual⁵. Initiative is one of the early changes that caregivers witness. If walking for exercise is a new activity, it is harder to get the individual with dementia to choose the activity.

The good news for caregivers is walking requires very little special equipment other than a good pair of shoes. Depending on your location, there are folks who walk in their neighborhoods, in their local mall, even in a gym. Study shows that a simple routine of twenty minutes a day, five times a week is effective in slowing cognitive decline⁶. If your loved one is experiencing bouts of daily agitation in the afternoon, known as sundown syndrome, walking with a family member regularly can alleviate sundown syndrome and improve sleep quality⁷. Morning is an ideal time for walking with Alzheimer's research showing better balance control and walking speed than in the evening.⁸

How to get started? Consider associating a walk with a positive *out of the house* routine already in place. For example, if the trip to the market is a daily routine, consider adding twenty minutes of walking in the trip, either in the store, or on the way to the store. Research shows that the simple act of getting out of the house is associated with better cognitive function, physical ability and emotional state.⁹ Even if you need to bookend the experience with positive treats on either side of the walk, the positives appear to outweigh the negatives.

Another strategy is to begin a walking group with others living with dementia. This has proven to be a powerful experience. *Paul's Club* is a group of 12-15 individuals with mild to moderate dementia who meet and walk together in their neighborhood. This experience has yielded three positive themes: a focus that is not on diagnosis, a feeling of belonging, and a claiming of citizenship in the community.¹⁰

How might you find others living with dementia to get a walking group started? Consider your local support group or memory café. As you get to know attendees, you may find others equally interested in improving life with dementia by walking. Set a date and time remembering the curves that life with dementia may take for one or all of you. Build up the energy for the event by promoting it verbally to your loved one. For additional support in finding others living with dementia, consider reaching out Arden Courts, where memory care is all they do.

Footnotes

¹Morris, J. K., Vidoni, E. D., Johnson, D. K., Van Sciver, A., Mahnken, J.D., et. Al. (2017). Aerobic exercise for Alzheimer's disease: A randomized controlled pilot trial, *Public Library of Science One*, 12(2): e0170547, doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0170547. eCollection 2017.

²Bossers, W.J., van der Woude, L.H., Boersma, F., Hortobágyi, T., Scherder, E.J., et al., (2016). Comparison of effect of two exercise programs on Activities of Daily Living in individuals with dementia: A 9-week randomized, controlled trial, *Journal of American Geriatric Society*, 64(6): 1258-1266.

³Lowery, D., Cerga-Pashoja, A., Iliffe, S., Thuné-Boyle, I., Griffin, M., et al. The effect of exercise on behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia: the EVIDEM-E randomized controlled clinical trial, *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 29(8): 819-827.

⁴Lambert, S. D., Duncan, L.R., Kapellas, S., Bruson, A.M., Myrand, M., Santa Mina, D., Culos-Reed, N., Lambrou, A. (2016). A Descriptive Systematic Review of Physical Activity Interventions for Caregivers: Effects on Caregivers' and Care Recipients' Psychosocial Outcomes, Physical Activity Levels, and Physical Health, *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 50(6):907-919.

⁵Gagliardi, C., Papa, R., Postacchini, D., Giuli, C. (2016). Association between cognitive status and physical activity: study profile on baseline survey of the My Mind project, *International Journal of Environmental Research in Public Health*,13(6).

⁶Lambert S. D., Duncan L. R., Kapellas, S, Bruson, A. M., Myrand, M, Santa Mina, D, Culos-Reed, N, & Lambrou, A. (2016). A descriptive systematic review of physical activity interventions for caregivers; effects on caregivers' and care recipients' psychosocial outcomes, physical activity levels, and physical health, *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 50(6): 907-919.

⁷Shih, Y.H., Pai ,M.C., Huang, Y.C., Wang, J.J. (2017). Sundown syndrome, sleep quality, and walking among community-dwelling people with Alzheimer's disease, *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association*,18(5):396-401.

⁸Paillard, T., Noé, F., Bru, N., Couderc, M., Debove, L. (2016). The impact of time of day on the gait and balance control of Alzheimer's patients, *Chronobiology International*, 33(2):161-168.

⁹Petersen, J., Austin, D., Mattek, N., Kaye, J. (2015). Time out-of-home and cognitive, physical, and emotional wellbeing of older adults: a longitudinal mixed effects model, *Public Library of Science One*, 10(10).

¹⁰Phinney, A., Kelson E., Baumbusch, J., O'Connor, D., Purves, B. (2016). Walking in the neighborhood: Performing social citizenship in dementia, *Dementia (London)*, May;15(3):381-394.

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