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Fairbanks woman's death sheds light on harsh reality of living with Alzheimer's disease

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FAIRBANKS — When you are caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's, the possibility of that person wandering off is an ever-present worry. In fact, six out of 10 Alzheimer's patients will wander at some point, and many do so repeatedly, according to the Alzheimer's Association website (www.alz.org).

The situation becomes even more serious in places like Alaska, where severe weather conditions can spell death for someone who has wandered outside and is unprepared for the elements.

This danger was brought to reality this week when Bonnie L. Scott, a 63-year-old Fairbanks woman who suffered from Alzheimer's, became confused while driving an acquaintance home in Fairbanks and ended up 80 miles northeast on the Steese Highway.

Scott wandered away from her vehicle after running out of gas, and Alaska State Troopers were able to follow her footprints into the woods, where they found her body. She had died of exposure after walking by a manned Department of Transportation maintenance facility in which she could have found shelter and aid.

Most cases of wandering do not occur in vehicles and are instead instances of the individual simply walking out of the door while a caretaker is distracted or sleeping.

To minimize the risk of wandering, experts suggest making changes around the home, such as camouflaging exit doors by painting them the same color as the wall, and draping door knobs with same-color cloth.

Placing a mirror next to the door can also stop the potential wanderer — they either think there is someone else there, or they become distracted by their own reflection.

Extra door latches can be placed at the tops or bottom of doors, where they will not be noticed, and car keys should be kept hidden. Chimes or alarms can be placed on doors to alert the caregiver.

Since wandering is often caused by restlessness, fear or physical need, make sure that basics such as hunger, thirst and the need to use the toilet are all met regularly.

If it is physically possible, provide the individual with recreational opportunities such as short, supervised walks or get them to help with simple household chores. Reassure them if they feel agitated or fearful, and give them a routine to help them feel secure.

Even though caregivers are often tempted to keep a person's Alzheimer's a secret, it is important that neighbors and family members be told of potential wandering, and be provided with a good contact number. Always keep a current, clear photo of the individual on hand, and consider keeping one on file with your local police department.

Keep as much identification as possible on the person — place it in every coat, purse, pocket or wallet, and think about providing the person with an ID bracelet or necklace.

Since identification is only helpful once the person has been found, consider purchasing an electronic tracking device that can be used to locate them before tragedy occurs. According to the Alzheimer's Foundation of America website, a person with dementia "only stands a 50 percent chance of survival if they are not found within the first 24 hours."

Finally, do not leave the individual alone. Since it is virtually impossible for one person to keep an Alzheimer's sufferer in sight at all times, it is essential that the caregiver establish a support network that can help out and provide a break when needed.

Alzheimer's Resource of Alaska provides services, information and education to Alaskans dealing with Alzheimer's and has five offices statewide. They can be reached at their Fairbanks office at 452-2277, or visited at www.alzalaska.org.

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