

Alzheimer's SOS - Safe and Sound



More than anything else, our job is to ensure that our patients with dementia are safe. That's why we have a series of questions we call our "what ifs?" for our caregivers.

"What if there was a fire or a break-in? Could your loved one escape or call for help?" Often, families provide daytime care and then go home for the night, assuming everything will be fine. But if the patient smelled smoke, was awakened by the smoke alarm, or heard breaking glass or shouting, what would they do? At the very least, alarm systems, cameras and other technology could be installed to alert a family member to get emergency help.

When we ask our patients to tell us what they would do if there was a fire, a common answer is, "I would call the fire department." But when we ask if they know the phone number, we hear, "Well, I'm sure it's in the phone book and I could look it up."

At the very least, alarm systems, cameras and other technology could be installed to alert a family member to get emergency help.

"What if your loved one fell? Could they get help? Could they even reach a phone?" Remember that 50 percent of seniors who fall do not have the strength to get off the floor. By the way, when someone lies in the same position on a hard surface, it only takes two hours to develop a pressure sore. Lie there

several hours, and the injured muscles release toxins into the bloodstream which can lead to kidney failure. This is life-threatening and a common cause of death when someone falls and is unable to get up for hours to days.

Certainly the lifelines which automatically alert if the person falls or faints are lifesavers—if the patient wears them.

"**What if** someone came to the door? Would your loved one let them in? Could they be sold something like a new roof, a different insurance plan, an indoor pool or truckload of meat?" We have seen all of the above.

"**What if** someone called on the phone pretending to be from the IRS? Would your loved one give out financial information?" Again, we have seen this happen (and worse) in our patients who were home alone.

Our last "**what if**" is usually a shock for our caregivers. "If something happened to you, could your loved one call 911?" We have heard heart-breaking stories from caregivers who were ill or injured and had to depend on their loved one to call for help. They talked about the person's struggle to find the phone, pick up the receiver, follow directions to dial, be able to tell the 911 operator their address, and to describe what happened.

This is the reason we often talk caregivers that they need a lifeline emergency button as much as their loved one.

As dementia progresses, some people can be home alone for part of the day, or even overnight, as long as they are safe. That means that they have access to food, water, and a bathroom. They are able to use the phone or a lifeline call button.

But adult children sometimes allow their parents to be home alone "because that's what they want" or "because we promised" when it is really not safe.

So if you have a loved one with dementia who is home alone, ask yourself "what if...?"

Disclaimer: This column addresses general and common concerns of people with dementia and their caregivers. All cases are inspired by true stories, but characters are fictionalized as required by federal HIPAA laws. Pamela Tronetti DO, AGSF and Janet Rooks MA, CDP provide care and support for patients and caregivers at the Parrish Senior Consultation Center and Parrish Senior Solutions.

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