How to Build an Emergency Contact Plan for Dementia Care

Why a Plan Matters

Caring for someone with dementia means preparing for moments when they wander, become confused, or need urgent help. An emergency contact plan puts the right people, information, and tools in place before a crisis hits. It reduces panic, saves time, and can make the difference between a quick resolution and a prolonged ordeal. This article walks through the key steps to build a plan that works for your situation, with practical points to watch at each stage.

Step 1: Identify the Core Contacts

Start by listing the people who should be notified in an emergency. This goes beyond the obvious. Think about who knows the person with dementia best, who lives nearby, and who can respond quickly at different times of day. The list might include a spouse, adult children, a neighbour, and a close friend. For each person, note their phone number, their relationship to the person, and the best time to reach them. Keep a printed copy near the phone and a digital copy on your mobile device.

What to watch: People's availability changes. A neighbour who works night shifts may not be reachable during the day. Update the list every few months, and after any major life change like a move or a job shift. Also consider who has a spare key, who knows the person's medical history, and who can stay calm in a stressful situation.

Step 2: Gather Medical Information

Emergency responders and hospital staff need accurate medical details to provide safe care. Prepare a one-page document that includes the person's full name, date of birth, diagnosed condition, allergies, current medications (with dosages and schedules), and any existing medical conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, or epilepsy. Also list the name and contact number of their primary doctor or specialist.


SOS

What to watch: Keep this document in a bright, labelled folder near the front door. Store a copy in the car glovebox and on your phone. When medications change, update the document the same day. If the person has a pacemaker, an implantable device, or a DNR order, note that clearly. Paramedics appreciate a quick reference they can read in seconds.

Step 3: Establish a Response Plan for Wandering

Wandering is one of the most common and worrying behaviours in dementia. A plan helps you act fast. Outline the steps to take if the person leaves home unexpectedly: check the immediate area first, then contact neighbours, then call the local police or 111 emergency service. Include a recent photo of the person, a description of what they were wearing, and details of any distinctive features like glasses, a walking aid, or a favourite hat.

What to watch: Time matters. The first 15 minutes are critical. Keep a small go-bag with a spare set of clothes, a phone charger, a bottle of water, and the photo and description sheet. Practice the plan with family members so everyone knows their role. If the person has a history of wandering, consider enrolling in a local dementia support programme that offers alert services.

Step 4: Use Technology for Safety and Peace of Mind

Modern devices can add a layer of protection without restricting the person's independence. A GPS medical alarm, for example, combines location tracking with an SOS button. If the person becomes disoriented or falls, they can press the button to send a text alert to their emergency contacts, along with their live location. Some devices also include fall detection, which automatically triggers an alert if a fall is detected and the person does not get up within a set time.

When choosing a device, consider battery life, range, and ease of use. A wearable medical alarm that the person can wear as a pendant or on a wristband works well for people who may forget to carry a phone. Look for a system that allows you to set safe zones - virtual boundaries that send an alert if the person leaves a designated area. The device should be simple to operate, with a large button and clear audio feedback. For New Zealand families, familyr.co.nz offers a dementia GPS tracker and wearable medical alarm with these features, designed specifically for the local context.

What to watch: Introduce the device gradually. Let the person wear it for short periods at first, and explain its purpose in a calm, positive way. Some people may feel it is an invasion of privacy; framing it as a tool that helps them stay independent can ease that concern. Test the SOS function weekly to ensure it works, and check the battery level daily. Also, make sure the device is water-resistant if the person may wear it in the shower or while washing hands.



Step 5: Create a Communication Tree

A communication tree ensures that information flows quickly and without confusion. Designate one person as the primary contact who will alert others. That person calls the next person on the list, who calls the next, and so on. This avoids everyone calling each other at the same time and overwhelming the phone lines. The tree should include a note about what information to share: the nature of the emergency, the person's location, and any actions already taken.

What to watch: Choose a primary contact who is reliable and has good judgment under pressure. Share the tree with everyone on it, and review it together every six months. If someone's phone number changes, update the tree immediately. Keep a copy of the tree in the same place as the medical information folder.

Step 6: Prepare for Medical Emergencies

Dementia can mask other health problems. A person may not be able to describe chest pain, a fever, or a headache. Plan for common scenarios: a fall, a seizure, a sudden change in behaviour, or signs of infection like a urinary tract infection. For each scenario, note the symptoms to look for and the steps to take. For example, if the person falls and cannot get up, do not try to lift them alone - call 111 emergency service and stay with them until help arrives.

What to watch: Keep a list of the person's baseline behaviour - their usual mood, energy level, and appetite. Any sudden change can be a sign of a medical issue. If the person becomes unusually agitated, sleepy, or confused, check their temperature and look for signs of pain. Have a plan for who will accompany them to the hospital and who will stay with other family members at home.

Step 7: Review and Update the Plan Regularly

An emergency plan is not a one-time task. Dementia progresses, and the person's needs and abilities change. Set a reminder to review the plan every three months. Check that all contact numbers are current, that the medical information is accurate, and that the technology - such as the GPS medical alarm - is still working properly. Also consider whether the person's wandering patterns have changed, or whether new safe zones are needed.



What to watch: If the person moves to a new home, enters residential care, or starts new medication, update the plan immediately. Involve the person in the review as much as their condition allows; their input can help the plan feel collaborative rather than imposed. Keep a copy of the plan with the person's daily care notes, and share it with any new caregivers or family members who join the support network.

Putting It All Together

An emergency contact plan for dementia care is a living document that grows with the person you support. It brings together the right contacts, clear medical information, a practical response plan, and reliable technology. The goal is to reduce stress in a crisis and ensure that help arrives quickly and effectively. For families exploring wearable safety devices, **familyr.co.nz** provides a dedicated solution that integrates with the kind of plan described

here. Start with the steps that feel most urgent, then build from there. Even a simple plan is better than none, and each update makes it stronger.