

Electronic Tracking

COMMON QUESTIONS

- What are the risks and benefits of electronically tracking a person with dementia?
- Should the person with Alzheimer's disease be involved in the decision to utilize electronic tracking?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Becoming lost, confused about location and wandering are common symptoms of Alzheimer's disease and can be life-threatening. It is estimated that up to 60 percent of individuals with Alzheimer's disease will wander during the course of the disease, and of those, approximately 50 percent will suffer serious injury or even death if not found within 24 hours. The stress experienced by families and caregivers when a person with dementia wanders and becomes lost is significant. New technology in electronic tracking may offer viable solutions to address this issue.

There are many technologies based on global positioning, cellular and radio frequency systems that have the ability to locate devices and individuals carrying them. However, these technologies are not always accurate and do not work in certain situations or locations. Furthermore, there are ethical considerations in electronically tracking an individual who may not or may not have the capacity to consent.

The idea of electronically tracking individuals with Alzheimer's disease raises the issue of limiting personal liberty. Currently, neither evidence nor research has caught up with existing and emerging technologies. No clear-cut answer exists to the question of whether the benefits of managing the location of a person with dementia outweigh the risks of limiting personal liberty; moreover, the laws on surrogate decision-making do not specifically address electronic tracking.

ASSOCIATION POSITION

It is important for persons with Alzheimer's disease and their families to be aware that wandering or becoming lost is possible and the development of a plan to address it is critical. Due to the progressive nature of Alzheimer's disease, families must address safety issues throughout the course of the disease. This requires regular re-evaluation of safety measures. For example, early in the disease, the person with dementia may be able to ask for help if they become lost or use a cell phone for assistance if he or she becomes lost; this may not be possible later, and personal supervision will be required.

The Association recognizes that the use of electronic tracking devices and related technology may be an appropriate part of a comprehensive safety plan. The possible benefits of electronically tracking a person with dementia include:

- The ability for the person with dementia to travel about in their community and maintain independence as long as possible.
- Peace of mind for individuals with the disease to know they may be located if they become lost.
- Peace of mind for caregivers to know they may locate individuals with dementia if they become lost.
- The ability to postpone the need for more secure environments.

The possible risks or arguments against electronically tracking a person with dementia include:

- Loss of personal liberty.
- The danger of utilizing the tracking device for malevolent purposes.

When making decisions around the use of electronic tracking tools, the Association recommends the following:

- Involve the person with dementia and openly discuss the risks and benefits of utilizing such a system. When possible, obtain the consent of the person with dementia to participate.
- Become educated on electronic tracking systems to determine whether a system would be viable and appropriate for the individual situation.
- Develop an overall safety plan that is regularly reassessed based on the needs of the individual with dementia.
- Do not consider an electronic tracking system to be a replacement for necessary supervision but rather a part of an overall safety plan.
- In cases where the person with dementia no longer has the capacity to consent to electronic tracking, the person's surrogate should weigh the risks and benefits for the individual situation.
- When choosing an electronic tracking system, ensure that appropriate security functions are inherent to the system to avoid allowing access to outside or unknown individuals.

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Electronic Tracking Bibliography

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