

# safe travels

## alzheimer's association offers tips for safe traveling with dementia patients

by sharon coyle

Pat and Ken Belongia of Kenosha, Wisconsin, really enjoyed traveling during their more than 50-year marriage.

Whether spending time in Door County – where they resided for six months each year – or traveling to other states, they were true traveling companions until Ken started having difficulties doing his job as a post office supervisor.

Clearly something was wrong the day they were in Door County and Ken said to Pat: “I don’t know how to get to the grocery store.”

Signs of dementia and change began in the late 1980s when Ken was only 59, but the diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease came in 2000. Still, it didn’t deter the couple from traveling together because Ken’s care and their travel plans became Pat’s mission.

Ken passed away in 2009, but Pat has wonderful memories of traveling with him because of careful planning. She fondly recalls trips they made to Disney World, Hawaii and Alaska.

As a volunteer with the Alzheimer’s Association, Pat now is a co-facilitator of a support group for caregivers of people with Alzheimer’s, answering questions on a variety of topics including traveling with loved ones who have dementia or Alzheimer’s.

The Alzheimer’s Association has a number of suggestions and tips that can be helpful to the caregivers of Alzheimer’s patients so that traveling can still be a fun – and safe – experience. Among the tips: Have a solid plan, advised Krista Scheel, program director at the Alzheimer’s Association’s southeastern Wisconsin chapter.

“Have a plan A, B, C and D,” she said, adding that it is important to remember that a change in environment can cause confusion and potential wandering in a person with dementia. “You know your loved ones best and can keep things scaled down,” she said.

### Important Strategies

Other tips for traveling with your loved ones, according to

Scheel and Belongia, include the following:

- If traveling by car, avoid repeated stops.
- If traveling by airplane, try to book nonstop flights
- If staying at a hotel, keep the door to your room locked and let the staff know you are traveling with someone who has memory loss.
- Bring along items that comfort your loved one, such as a pillow or blanket.
- Play soothing music.
- Use your car’s child-proof locks.

If planning a tour event or outing, try to arrange it at a time of day when your loved one is at his or her best. Avoid activities as the day winds down and to avoid the “sundown” effect, in which a person with dementia often gets more upset or confused as evening approaches.

Upon arriving at your destination, include your loved one in activities from the beginning of the visit.

“When you get out of the car, tell your loved one exactly who you are visiting,” Belongia suggested.

If suddenly confronted with a crowd or loud noises, move to a quieter location. And when on a tour or at a special venue, look for places with family bathrooms that make it easier to keep track of your loved one.

If you feel a trip is too much for your loved one, consider having friends or relatives come visit you.

### Safe Return Program

Scheel suggested enrolling your loved one in the National Alzheimer’s Association Medic-Alert+ Safe Return Program, which can help in identification if they wander off. Each person enrolled wears either an identification bracelet or necklace. When a person enrolls in the program, caregivers submit a picture of the person with dementia, along with important emergency medical information.

“It also helps local law enforcement to help in the search,” said Scheel, who added that the program has a 99 percent success rating of locating and safely returning loved ones.

