

Low Light, Dementia & “Stop–Start” Walking



Have you ever noticed this? Your loved one is walking... and then suddenly they stop. Then they start again. Then they stop again. It can look like they're being difficult, unsure, or “making a fuss”, but sometimes the reason is much simpler than people realise: they can't see clearly enough to feel safe.

Dementia doesn't only affect memory. It can also affect how the brain interprets what the eyes are seeing. When lighting is low, patchy, or too dim, the brain has to work much harder to process where the floor ends and the wall begins, whether a shadow is a step, a hole, or an object, whether the hallway is clear or blocked, whether a rug edge is a raised surface, or whether a dark doorway is actually a safe space to walk into. That extra processing load creates uncertainty — and uncertainty often shows up as “stop–start” walking, freezing or hesitation, tiny shuffling steps, reaching for walls or furniture, refusing to move forward, pacing, or turning back.

It's also important to remember that it's not always fear you can simply talk away. Sometimes it's the brain saying, *“I can't confirm what I'm seeing... so I'm stopping to protect myself.”* That pause isn't stubbornness — it's self-protection.

A simple test is to look at the space from their height and at their eye level. If you notice darker patches, harsh glare from a lamp, shiny floors reflecting light, long shadows across the walking path, or a hallway that seems to disappear at the end, imagine trying to walk through that when your brain can't interpret it properly anymore.

Small changes can make a big difference. Aim for brighter, even lighting rather than “cosy” dim lighting, especially in the hallway and bathroom during late afternoon and early evening. Reduce strong shadows by using more than one light source, and watch for glare by adjusting

lamp placement so light isn't shining directly into the eyes. Contrast can also help — for example, lighter walls with clearer edges or darker handrails — and gentle night lights can make routes like the toilet, bedroom, and kitchen feel more predictable and safe.

Sometimes the behaviour isn't "dementia being difficult". Sometimes it's dementia saying, "*I don't feel visually safe.*" And when we change the environment, we often see the behaviour soften.

Sometimes it's not 'refusing to walk'... it's 'I can't trust what I'm seeing.'

Low or uneven light + patterned flooring can look like holes, steps, or obstacles — and that creates stop-start walking and hesitation.

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