



Air travel is a common form of transportation for many people living with dementia and their care partners. People living with dementia and their care partners use air travel for family visits, medical appointments, leisure and business. Navigating airports can be stressful and overwhelming with the added challenges of noise, unfamiliar surroundings, confusing signage, difficulties managing security screening, finding gates, utilizing public restrooms, boarding/deplaning the aircraft and checking/retrieving luggage. In addition, many, but not all, people living with dementia have multiple co-occurring health conditions that can complicate the airport experience such as mobility challenges and hearing or vision impairments.

What is Dementia?

Dementia is a general term for a loss of memory and other thinking abilities that is serious enough to interfere with activities of daily life. Dementia has many causes. Alzheimer’s disease, the most common cause of dementia, is a disease of the brain that leads to problems with memory, thinking, and behavior. Alzheimer’s and other dementias are not a normal part of aging.

How Dementia Symptoms Manifest at the Airport

Common symptoms of dementia ¹	Examples in the airport
Memory loss that disrupts daily life	Person forgets where they are traveling; Seeks assistance but rapidly forgets information provided (e.g., where to locate gate, restroom, etc.); Forgets security protocols and may exceed liquid limits, fails to remove metal from bags or something considered a carry-on weapon; Asks repetitive questions to gate agent/airport personnel.
Challenges in planning/problem solving	Difficulty using self-check-in and may have trouble locating full-service counter; Unable to understand how to use the airport monitors; Does not refer to ticket for gate number.
Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, work or leisure	Has difficulty packing suitcase or carry-on bag; Has difficulty managing money transactions in airport.
Confusion with time or place	Goes off to the restroom alone and cannot find the way back to the gate or travel companion; Sitting in the wrong gate area and misses flight; Does not routinely look at the time to manage the travel schedule.
Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships	Unable/unaware to use airport monitors; Has difficulty wayfinding and may not comprehend signage.
New problems with words in speaking, writing and reading	Has difficulty following instructions or asking a clear question; Trouble reading ticket and matching to monitor for flight information.
Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps	Leaves ID /bags/purse/personal items/mobility device in security area and/or gate area and/or bathroom; May accuse others of stealing any of these items.
Decreased or poor judgment	Difficulty following customer service lines for checking in, security, boarding and may cut in front of others. Taking food or items from stores/restaurants without paying. May wander away from travel companion. May inappropriately trust strangers.
Withdrawal from work or social activities	Appears apathetic or disinterested when airport staff try to engage.
Changes in mood and personality	Becomes agitated while waiting for flight or boarding due to too much noise and large number of passengers; Walks up to small children/babies wanting to talk with them/hold them; Becomes anxious when waiting to board a flight.

¹alz.org/10signs Alzheimer’s Association © Jan Dougherty MS, RN, FAAN, TravALZ LLC, www.travelalz.com

Taking Action to Create a Dementia Friendly Airport

A dementia friendly airport accommodates the needs of persons living with dementia and their care partners to navigate throughout the airport safely and comfortably. This includes:

Environmental considerations to assist persons living with dementia and their care partners to use the amenities and resources (restaurants, lavatories, waiting areas, shops, transportation to gates and terminals). These considerations include:

- Clear signage and wayfinding
- Minimizing visual and auditory stimulation
- Provision of quiet areas, including in restaurants and gate waiting areas (dedicated rooms or seating away from noise/crowds)
- Readily accessible toilets (i.e., family restrooms)
- Avoiding floor surfaces with glare
- Well-lit walkways and common spaces
- Entrances, exits, elevators, escalators, staircases, people movers, and trams should be clearly identified and easy to use

Having protocols or procedures in place for settings where more assistance may be needed to help persons living with dementia and their care partners navigate the airport, board and deplane in a timely and low-stress manner (e.g., check-in, baggage check, baggage claim and security).

Airport personnel, TSA staff, volunteers, vendor and airline employees who are trained about dementia and can support the needs of persons with dementia and their care partners.

Resolving dementia-related crises in a competent and caring manner utilizing readily available staff who have received dementia friendly training.

Encouraging airlines to accommodate the needs of persons with dementia and their care partners while on board the aircraft and in areas of the airport that are under airline jurisdiction.

Conduct an informal assessment of your airport and/or assist your local airport in performing a formal environmental audit to identify strengths and weaknesses. Examples of things to look for:

- Clear signage for navigating from parking areas through departure, check-in, baggage check, security lanes, boarding gates, and access to amenities including restrooms, shops, and food services.
- Clear signage for navigating from arrival areas through customs and border patrol, baggage claim, access to amenities, and access to ground transport
- Adaptive transport to navigate the airport
- Floor surfaces that minimize glare
- Well-lit walkways and common areas that avoid glare and shadows

See our reference section below for an environmental assessment guide and wayfinding audit checklist.

Determine what supports and services are available at your airport to travelers living with dementia and their care partners/travel companions:

- Have you become familiar with the airport facility, services and senior staff?
- Can you volunteer to participate on a travelers with disabilities committee?
- Are there rehearsal trips or other opportunities for people living with dementia and travel companions to familiarize themselves with the airport and/or a plane before flying?
- What concierge or volunteer programs does your airport offer to assist travelers with disabilities? If these are available, be certain you know when, where, and how to request the assistance. Learn what assistance is available to travelers by visiting the departing, connecting, and/or arrival airport websites.

Determine what supports and services are available at your airport to travelers living with dementia and their care partners/travel companions (cont.):

- Identify any assistance programs available to travelers with disabilities through their selected airline(s).
- Determine whether one unticketed individual needs to request a gate pass to accompany the traveler with dementia through the airport, including security to boarding, or to greet the arriving traveler with dementia and accompany them until they leave the airport.
- Register with TSA Cares a minimum of 72 hours before the flights, to request assistance with going through airport security.
- Does the airport participate in the [Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program](#) and offer Sunflower lanyards to people who request them?
- Are the employees of airport concessions, wheelchair services, and retail services trained to assist travelers living with dementia?
- Does the airport website have clear and accessible information about supportive airport services for travelers with disabilities / hidden disabilities, including cognitive disabilities?
- Are there adequate numbers and placement of easily accessible family bathrooms in both the main terminal and concourse(s)?
- Are there marked and easily accessible quiet spaces?
- Is a special assistance or fast track security lane available for travelers with disabilities, hidden disabilities, and/or others with special needs, e.g., wheelchairs and scooters?

Interacting With People with Dementia

Communication becomes more challenging for people living with dementia. When the following tips are incorporated, the person with dementia, airport staff and volunteers, will find greater success when interacting.

Encourage dementia friendly education for airport staff and volunteers by:

- Offer Dementia Friends training
- Create a team of Dementia Friends Champions to facilitate ongoing Dementia Friends sessions
- Approach the person from the front, get down to eye level and maintain eye contact, introduce yourself by name and by role at the airport.
- Call the person by their preferred name.
- Always show dignity and respect during communication. Don't talk just to the travel companion and past the person with dementia as if s(he) is not there.
- Watch your emotions – if you are showing frustration or impatience, the person will pick up on that and may respond negatively.
- Slow down your communication. Use shorter sentences – but never childlike. Repeat the information if needed.
- Ask only one question at a time and give plenty of time to respond.
- Offer comfort and reassurance if (s)he is having trouble communicating – let them know it's okay.
- Offer a guess if needed.
- Avoid correcting or criticizing – try to listen for the real message.
- Avoid arguing – just let it go.
- Encourage non-verbal communication by, guiding, pointing or using gestures.
- Respect privacy. Do not announce the person's dementia in front of other airport visitors or otherwise draw unwelcome or unnecessary attention to the person's difficulty.

Creating a Dementia Friendly Physical Space

Small changes in a physical space can make a big difference in making an environment feel safe to someone with dementia. A welcoming environment (both indoors and outdoors) helps a person with dementia continue to access airports. There are many best practices you can consider to improve access for people with dementia. Most are relatively low cost and can benefit everyone, including people with dementia.

- Entrances should be clearly visible and understood as an entrance. Make sure that glass doors are clearly marked.
- Signage for finding your way around should be clear, should use bold type, and should have contrast between the words and the background.
- Lighting at entrances should be high powered and include natural light when possible. Avoid pools of bright light and deep shadows.
- Flooring should be plain, not shiny, and not slippery. Pathways should be wide and free of clutter.
- A family/unisex restroom will allow someone to be assisted without causing embarrassment to them or another user.

References

Know the 10 Warning Signs www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_know_the_10_signs.asp

Additional Resources

The Dementia-Friendly Airports Working Group provides comprehensive tools and resources to guide environmental and practice change(s) needed to support people living with dementia and their care partners. We encourage airports and dementia friendly communities to study this site in detail and utilize this growing expertise. We are grateful to this group of dedicated volunteers who continue to address the unique travel needs of people living with dementia and their care partners.

[Dementia-Friendly Airports Working Group](#)

[TSA Guide for Best Practices Screening People Living With Dementia](#)

[Resources for Travel](#)

[Hidden Disabilities Store \(Sunflower Lanyard\)](#)

[Dementia Friendly Community – Environmental Assessment Guide \(DFC-EAT\)](#)

[Dementia Friends USA](#)

[Wayfinding Accessibility Audit Checklist](#)

[Travel Well with Dementia: Essential Tips to Enjoy the Journey](#)

About TSA:

TSA Cares – Passenger Support <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/passenger-support>

TSA Cares Request for Assistance <https://www.tsa.gov/contact-center/form/cares>

TSA – Special Procedures for Travel with Disabilities & Medical Conditions <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/special-procedures>

Airports are just one important part of the community. Working alongside other sectors can help the whole community become more dementia friendly.

Learn more at dfamerica.org

This Airport Sector Guide was developed in partnership with the [Dementia-Friendly Airports Working Group](#).