Can location tracking support independence for people with dementia?

Yes, location tracking can support independence for people with dementia, when it is used thoughtfully. The goal is not surveillance but safety: giving the person more freedom to move around while reducing the worry that they might become lost or disoriented. A wandering alert device is one tool that families can consider as part of a broader plan.

Dementia affects memory, judgement and spatial awareness. A person may walk with a clear purpose, then suddenly not recognise where they are or how to return home. This is not deliberate wandering; it is a symptom of the condition. Families often face a difficult choice: restrict the person's movement for their own safety, or let them walk freely and accept the risk. Location tracking offers a middle path.

How location tracking works in practice

A wearable device with GPS location sends the person's position to a smartphone app or a web portal. Carers can see where the person is in near real time. If the person moves beyond a preset home boundary, the system can send a mobile alert. This is sometimes called a geofence. The alert gives the family time to check in or to help the person return, without needing to follow them every moment.

For the person with dementia, the device can be worn as a watch, a pendant or clipped to clothing. Many are designed to look ordinary, so they do not draw attention or feel medical. The person may not even think about the device once it is on. That is the point: the technology works in the background, supporting independence without constant reminders that they are being watched.



The balance between safety and dignity

Some families worry that tracking feels like monitoring. It is worth discussing the arrangement openly with the person, if they are able to understand. Many people with early-stage dementia recognise that they sometimes lose their way and accept help. Framing the device as a tool for their own freedom, not as a way to control them, makes a difference.

A wandering alert device can also reduce stress for the carer. When a family member is awake at night wondering whether the person has left the house, knowing that an alert will sound if a door is opened or a boundary is crossed allows everyone to rest more easily. Less anxiety in the carer often leads to a calmer, more patient approach during the day, which benefits the person with dementia too.

Practical features to look for

Not all devices are the same. Some key features to consider include:

- GPS location accuracy: the device should work both outdoors and indoors, and update frequently enough to be useful.
- Geofence or safe zone: you set a virtual boundary around the home or another familiar area. If the person leaves that zone, you receive an alert.

- Battery life: a device that needs charging every day may be forgotten or left off. Longer battery life means less disruption.
- Comfort and design: if the device is bulky or uncomfortable, the person may refuse to wear it.
- Two-way communication: some devices allow the person to press a button to call a carer, or let the carer speak through the device. This can be reassuring for both sides.

Families in New Zealand have access to options that combine these features. One example is familyr.co.nz, which provides a dementia GPS tracker and wearable medical alarm with location tracking, safe zones, SOS calling, fall detection and no monthly fees. The device is designed specifically for the needs of people with memory loss and their carers.

Setting up a safe zone that works

A home boundary should be realistic. If the person enjoys walking to the corner shop or visiting a neighbour, include those places inside the safe zone. A boundary that is too tight will trigger alerts constantly, which defeats the purpose. A boundary that is too wide may not catch a situation where the person has walked further than intended. Start with a generous zone and adjust it as you learn the person's typical routes.

Some devices also let you set multiple safe zones: one for the home, one for a relative's house, one for a day centre. This flexibility means the person can move between familiar places without setting off alarms, while still being protected if they go somewhere unexpected.



Using location tracking as part of a missing person plan

No device is foolproof. Batteries run flat, signals are lost in some areas, and a person may remove the device. That is why a missing person plan is important. A good plan includes:

- a recent photograph of the person
- a list of places they might go, such as a former workplace, a park, or a bus stop
- contact numbers for neighbours, local shops and the police
- a note of any distinguishing clothing or items they usually carry

If the person does go missing, the tracking device can give you a starting point. You can check the last known GPS location and share it with searchers. Even if the device is not currently

transmitting, the history of movement can help narrow the search area.

For families who want a device that covers both daily safety and emergency response, options like those from familyr.co.nz combine tracking with fall detection and SOS calling. That means if the person falls or feels unwell, they can call for help without needing to remember a phone number or explain where they are.

Respecting privacy while staying safe

Location data is personal. Choose a device that lets you control who can see the information. Some services store data on cloud servers; ask how long the data is kept and whether it is encrypted. Read the privacy policy before committing. The aim is to keep the person safe, not to create a permanent record of their every move.

Talk to the person about what the device does. If they understand that it helps them go for a walk without worrying the family, they may accept it more readily. For some people, seeing the device as a companion rather than a monitor makes all the difference.



The bigger picture: independence with support

Location tracking is not a cure for dementia, and it does not replace human care. What it does is give families a practical way to manage the risk of wandering while allowing the person to keep moving, exploring and living their life. When used with respect and clear communication, a wandering alert device can reduce fear on both sides and help everyone feel more confident.

Every person with dementia is different. What works for one family may not work for another. The key is to find a solution that fits the person's habits, the carer's capacity, and the family's

values. Location tracking, done well, is one more tool that can help people with dementia stay independent for longer.