

Alzheimer's Dementia

Introduction

The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease. With dementia, it is difficult to think and interact with others. Even simple daily activities are challenging.

Alzheimer's disease gradually kills off healthy brain tissue. Memory and mental ability decrease without healthy brain tissue. This is why Alzheimer's usually leads to dementia.

More than 4 million older Americans have Alzheimer's disease. Even though there is no cure, there are treatments that help improve the quality of life. Caring for someone with Alzheimer's takes patience and a focus on the things a person can still do and enjoy.

This reference summary will help you understand Alzheimer's disease better. It discusses the stages of dementia, common behaviors of patients with dementia and guidelines to help you interact with someone who has dementia.

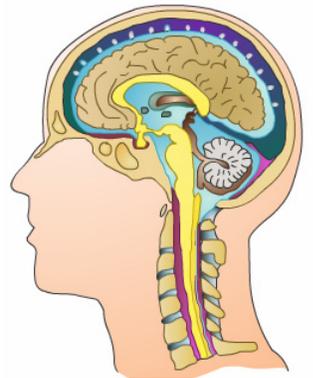
Overview of Dementia

Dementia is a loss of mental ability caused by damaged brain cells. It is not a normal part of aging.

People with dementia usually look confused. Sometimes it is hard for them to think. This can interfere with relationships at work and home.

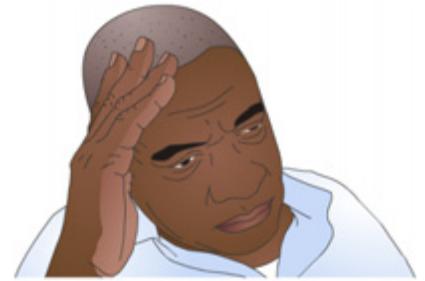
Dementia symptoms are changes in personality, behavior and emotions. They include:

- Memory loss, especially recent memory
- Poor judgment
- Impulse control
- Abstract thinking
- Inability to speak and communicate well



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Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia. Alzheimer's disease usually comes on steadily and gradually. The symptoms get worse over time and the person becomes more and more disabled.



There are defined stages to help recognize where a person is at as the dementia develops. Even though there are stages, the symptoms and amount of time it takes for dementia to develop are unpredictable.

Dementia may last a few months or it may last many, many years before the patient finally passes away. The average is 10 years from the early stages until the time of death.

Stages of Dementia

Alzheimer's disease usually moves through 4 stages.

1. Forgetful stage
2. Confused stage
3. Ambulatory dementia stage
4. End stage

The first stage of Alzheimer's usually lasts 2 to 4 years. A person gets more forgetful and begins to lose things. He or she may use lists and other memory aids to deal with forgetfulness.

In the early stage of Alzheimer's, it is normal for a person to blame problems on stress or being sick or tired. Depression is common at this point.

In the second stage of Alzheimer's disease the person becomes confused. Memory loss keeps getting worse. Over time, the person finds even simple daily activities difficult.



During the confused stage, a person might quit their job or resign from community groups. They know they forget more than is "normal." Again, depression is common.

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Gradually, a person with Alzheimer's become confused. They have difficulty keeping track of the following things, in this order:

1. Time
2. Place
3. Person (who they are, who you are)
4. Things (what objects are)



The person may ask the same questions repeatedly because they cannot remember the answer. Even though they do not remember something that just happened, they may still remember certain people.

A person with Alzheimer's may remember something he or she used to do so often that it was "automatic." A lady who knits may still be able to do simple stitches. A mechanic may still be able to do simple things, like change the oil.

In people with Alzheimer's, memory loss is so gradual that they often find ways to cover it up. To avoid embarrassment, they may make up answers when they do not know what to say. They may be sarcastic or witty if they do not know the answer to a question. For example, they may joke about being 29 if you ask their age.

Toward the end of the confused stage, it is difficult for the person to do things by him or herself. They are more likely to get mixed up, and may even get lost when they are close to home. It is also hard for them to deal with stress.

Sometimes it is necessary to find in-home assistance for the person toward the end of the confused stage. He or she may even need to be in a day care or a nursing home.



The third stage of Alzheimer's disease is called ambulatory dementia. During this stage, the person loses the ability to function in certain ways.

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During the ambulatory dementia stage, the person loses the following functions, in this order:

1. Taking a bath or shower
2. Putting outfits together
3. Getting dressed
4. Walking
5. Using the toilet
6. Reading and writing



It seems like the person becomes more withdrawn and self-centered. The depression goes away because they are less aware of their memory problems.

Eventually, a person with Alzheimer's does not understand what is said to them and they cannot respond.

Since a person in the ambulatory dementia stage cannot remember information or past experiences, he or she becomes unable to make decisions. It is difficult to recognize family members or even themselves in a mirror.

At this stage, the person often has false beliefs, called delusions, which affect their behavior. For example, they may come up with the idea that a friend is coming over for lunch and prepare a meal. Even though the friend never shows up, the person truly believes they had plans.

It is difficult for the person to deal with stress. He or she may become nervous or worried and argue a lot for no obvious reason.

A person in the third stage of Alzheimer's may pace back and forth or even wander off. They are often easily frustrated and may yell a word or phrase repeatedly. Again, there is usually no obvious reason.



To understand how scary the world becomes with Alzheimer's, think about what it would be like to forget, from minute to minute, what has happened. Everything would happen for the first time.

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In the fourth stage, or end stage, of Alzheimer's disease, the person cannot walk or do hardly anything. They cannot remember how to eat, swallow or chew. They lose weight and have a higher risk of health problems from not moving around. The end stage usually lasts 1 to 2 years. It is common for people in the end stage to wet or soil their pants. They may also have seizures.

Symptoms

When Alzheimer's causes a person to lose certain abilities, it can lead to behavioral problems. The loss of memory, judgment, impulse control, language and abstract thought can cause a person to do some shocking things.



Some difficult behaviors to understand and take care of are:

- Memory loss that is covered up or hidden
- Wandering
- Trouble sleeping
- Losing and hiding things
- Inappropriate sexual behavior

Other common behaviors of people with Alzheimer's disease are:

- Repeating questions or actions
- Territoriality
- Hallucinations
- Delusions
- Illusions

More common behaviors of people with Alzheimer's disease include:

- Agitation
- Combativeness
- Confusion
- Fearfulness
- Night walking
- Noisy behavior
- Purposeful wandering
- Sudden withdrawal from activities
- "Sundown Syndrome"



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People with Alzheimer's sometimes have over-reactive behaviors. These are over-reactions to common situations. For example taking a bath, getting dressed or being asked a question could trigger one of these reactions. The person might cry, blush, get mad or get very stubborn. The reaction is not appropriate for the situation.

Managing Symptoms

The best way to manage over-reactive behavior is to prevent it. Do not wait until the person over reacts before you adjust the routine or the environment.

Any of the following can increase stress for a person with Alzheimer's disease:

- Being tired
- Change of surroundings, caregiver, or routine
- Many things going on at once
- Trying to perform tasks they are no longer able to do because of mental or physical limitations. (Physical stressors)

A person with Alzheimer's cannot handle many things going on at the same time. We are able to choose which things to pay attention to and block out the rest but a person with Alzheimer's cannot.

A person with Alzheimer's has lower stress if he or she is not exposed to:

- Caffeine
- Television or radio
- Boredom
- Extra noise
- A lot of people at the same time
- Large rooms

Here are some tips to help you visit with a loved one who has Alzheimer's:

- Be calm and consistent
- Do not try to reason with them
- Do not ask them to "try harder"
- Do not try to teach them new routines
- Do not try to get them to do things they no longer can



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It is also important not to treat a person with Alzheimer's like a child. They are adults and deserve respect just like anyone else.

Unconditional positive regard is accepting the person regardless of what they do and how they act. This is what pets do - they love you no matter what!

Unconditional positive regard can be shown in the following ways:

- Use 1-on-1 communication
- Use touch to reassure
- Do not say "you are wrong"
- Do not confront – instead, distract



One of the most important ways to show respect for a person with Alzheimer's is the way you talk to them. Thinking, "Oh, what difference does it make?" is not helpful.

Communication Guidelines

This section discusses some guidelines for communicating with Alzheimer's patients. Use short words. There is no need for long or complicated words. Use simple sentences, with only one noun and one verb. Avoid complex sentences. Begin a conversation, especially at night, by calling the person by name and saying who you are.

You can use the following tips to keep your speech simple:

- Do not use slang
- Say each word clearly
- Speak slowly

Only speak extra loud if the patient is partly deaf. Do not speak louder simply because the patient gave no response.

If you ask a question, wait for a response. Give the person time to think about the question and come up with an answer. Be patient! Do not assume a pause means they did not understand.

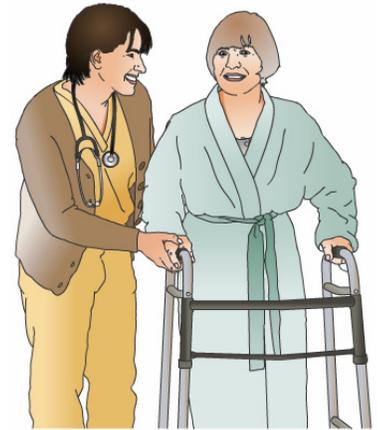


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Ask only one question at a time. You may confuse them by asking that they think about more than one thing at a time.

If you repeat a question, repeat it exactly. Unlike other situations where it helps to "re-phrase" the question, a person with Alzheimer's is best helped by asking the same question again.

Use humor whenever possible. Do not be afraid to laugh at yourself or the situation, as long as you are NOT laughing at the person!



Non-verbal messages become more important when dealing with a demented person. Pretend your non-verbal movements can be seen all the way across the room.

Try to include non-verbal gestures with everything you say verbally. Point, demonstrate, use your hands and body to help get the meaning across.

More specific non-verbal tips include:

- Stand right in front of the person. Make sure they see you and that you have their attention
- Maintain eye contact. Get them to look at you. That way they see your facial expression and your gestures.
- Move slowly. Do not threaten them with surprises. Remember, they could have an over-reaction at any time.
- If the person walks away while you are talking to them, do not try to stop them. Instead, move along with them.
- Use exaggerated facial expressions to emphasize your point, especially if the person cannot see or hear well.

There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease. However, it can be managed. There are many ways to help the person be "the best that they can be."

- Develop the abilities they still have
- Avoid unneeded stress
- Treat illness or other complications
- Educate and guide other family members

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Treatment

No treatment can stop AD. However, for some people in the early and middle stages of the disease, the drugs tacrine (Cognex®, which is still available but no longer actively marketed by the manufacturer), donepezil (Aricept®), rivastigmine (Exelon®), or galantamine (Razadyne™, previously known as Reminyl) may help prevent some symptoms from becoming worse for a limited time.



Another drug, memantine (Namenda®), has been approved to treat moderate to severe AD, although it also is limited in its effects.

Also, some medicines may help control behavioral symptoms of AD such as sleeplessness, agitation, wandering, anxiety, and depression.

Treating these symptoms often makes patients more comfortable and makes their care easier for caregivers.

Summary

The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease. With dementia, it is difficult to think and interact with others. Even simple daily activities are challenging.

More than 4 million older Americans have Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's disease gradually kills off healthy brain tissue. Memory and mental ability decrease without healthy brain tissue. This is why Alzheimer's usually leads to dementia.

There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease. However, it can be managed. There are many ways to help the person be "the best that they can be."

With patience, focus and a lot of love, you can help your loved one with Alzheimer's disease enjoy life as much as possible. He or she needs your support now more than ever!



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