

Understanding Alzheimer's Disease & Dementia

Alzheimer's is a disease that slowly and continuously destroys thinking skills, memory and (eventually) the ability to carry out the simple tasks that many take for granted every day. Symptoms usually appear in a person's mid-60s and is the most common cause of dementia among senior adults, affecting an estimated 5.3 million Americans. Everyone's brain is at risk for Alzheimer's disease.

Characteristics of Alzheimer's Disease: The Early Stages



Disorientation

They may get lost in the most familiar locations - even their own home. They may be unable to follow simple directions to get to a store or appointments. The current date and time are forgotten as the disease progresses.

Anomia

Trying to find the right word(s) can become an impossible task. They may forget names of familiar people and things. They may use other words in their place. This creates what some call "word salad."

Trouble with routines

They may forget daily routines like preparing a meal, paying bills or using a telephone.

Memory loss

People with Alzheimer's disease have problems recalling events from a few minutes ago to a few hours ago (short-term memory loss) - their long-term memories may be intact. They may ask the same question over and over, get "lost" in a simple conversation and misplace personal belongings.

Apraxia

People with Alzheimer's may forget how to use a fork, knife, tools and even a toothbrush.

Personality changes

As the disease progresses your loved one may become more challenging. Behaviors change, and he or she may become more withdrawn, frustrated, irritable, sensitive, inconsiderate and possibly violent.

Decline in grooming

Often, one of the first signs that something is wrong is a decline in a loved one's grooming habits. A previously well-groomed and clean person may now begin wearing the same clothes several days in a row, become unshaven, have uncombed hair and have an unkempt look.

Middle Stages

Poor short-term memory

After they finish eating, your loved one may want to know: "When do we eat?"

Inability to perform skilled movements

Early learned skills like tying a shoelace, brushing teeth or eating with a fork are forgotten.

Social withdrawal

Loved one may become totally and socially dependent upon primary caregiver. They may experience depression or be awkward in new groups of people.



Disorientation

Person, place, and their time: Your loved one may not know their relationship to you, know where they are or think the time-frame is 40+ years ago.

Language skills

Speech becomes jumbled or slow, words are forgotten or ideas cannot be expressed correctly.

Fewer inhibitions

They may make comments that are inappropriate, rude or even cruel. They may decide to undress in public setting.

Agitation and discomposure

Your loved one may become angry, agitated, anxious and unable to express his/her needs when encountering a confusing situation or idea.

Restlessness, fidgeting, pacing, or wandering

In Alzheimer's stage 2, your loved one may become restless, unable to sit for more than a few moments, may wander, rummage, pace and be constantly on the move.



Sleepiness

They may want to shut down and just sleep, become slow-moving, sit down and suddenly fall asleep, or even fall asleep during a meal.

Severe sleep disturbances

People in stage 2 may need 15 hours of sleep per day. Others may only sleep two to six hours per day with no daytime naps or rest time. Days and nights may become confused and switched.

Need for assistance

There is an increased need for assistance with Alzheimer's disease. People will need prompting, cueing and supervision. They may not be able to initiate their own activities.

Assistive devices

Loved ones may forget that they need dentures, eyeglasses or hearing aides.

Sundowning

This is a term associated with confusion, agitation and increased activity. Your loved one may be looking for something to do.



Changes in eating habits

Loved one may not want to eat or want to eat everything in sight (whether it is appropriate or not). Consequently, they may experience weight gain or loss. Sometimes this behavior can be a side-effect from a medication.

Hallucinations or delusions

People with dementia sometimes experience hallucinations. They may see, hear, smell, taste or feel things that are not really there. Hallucinations involving sight or hearing are the most common. Delusions are fixed false beliefs or ideas. It is usually the result of a disease process like Alzheimer's or psychiatric illness.

Late Stages

Upset sleep cycle

Medication-assisted sleep may be needed, or they could be awake all night and want to sleep all day.

Little or no memory

Short and long-term memory is severely impaired. The caregiver serves as the memory.

Difficulty communicating

Loved one may be unable to speak or understand words. However, a smile is always appropriate and a gentle touch. Non-verbal communication is vital for ongoing and respectful caregiving at this stage.

Increased frailty

Muscle weakness, aspiration pneumonia, flu, and other infections can be a problem in the late stages.

No recognition of family and friends

Individual may not recognize himself in the mirror. He may think it is another person and start a conversation or lash out. He may also think that a spouse, sibling, or parent is a stranger he doesn't recognize.

Difficulty with coordinated movements

Mobility issues occur. This includes trouble walking or the inability to use a walker or cane. Careful monitoring may be needed as they may be unable to grasp objects for support. Fall potentials are increased. Broken bones, like hips, may prove fatal.

Need for assistance

Loved one will need ongoing supervision, assistance, and direction for all activities.

Loss of bowel and/or bladder control

Loved one may not be able to control muscles or even realize they need to go to the bathroom.

Difficulty remembering how to eat

Using a utensil to bring food to one's mouth, biting, chewing, swallowing and the sensation of hunger may be forgotten. As a result, weight-loss may occur. Nutritional supplements, appetite enhancers, snacks and easy to digest foods may be considered at this stage.

We're here to help.

Our purposeful programming and community design is safe and stimulating. We research with family members to learn about your loved one's career, retirement, and special interests. Elements of individual life experiences are interwoven into the daily schedule. Stop by one of our Memory Care communities or call today to find answers and solutions with our Memory Care specialists.