

## Understanding Alzheimer's Disease

The following information has been provided in the hopes that you will understand more about Alzheimer's Disease and how it affects our loved one.

### What is Alzheimer's Disease?

Named after Alois Alzheimer, who first discovered the disease in 1906, Alzheimer's Disease is a degenerative disease of the brain that affects daily life functions. It occurs when brain tissue deteriorates causing a decline in memory and mental ability. It is not a normal part of aging and there is currently no cure for it.

### Facts & Figures, *from the Alzheimer's Association*

- Alzheimer's is the most common cause of dementia
- 5.3 million Americans have Alzheimer's
- It's the 6<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death
- Every 70 seconds a new case is diagnosed, the number of cases of Alzheimer's is expected to rise as baby boomers begin to hit the age of 65

### These are some signs noticed before being diagnosed with Alzheimer's:

- **Memory Loss.** The most common sign; includes forgetting recently learned information, dates/events, and repeating questions.
- **Communication.** Difficulties in finding the right word to say, substituting vague or wrong words for items they need or when expressing thoughts. Have trouble following conversations.
- **Poor/Loss of Judgment.** Start making unwise choices, don't pay attention to personal hygiene and solving everyday problems becomes difficult
- **Changes in Mood/Personality.** Experiences mood swings within seconds. May become depressed, withdraw themselves, have a hard time trusting family, can be restless and confused.
- **Disorientation.** Lose track of time and can't remember months, days or seasons. May not remember how they got somewhere or how to get home.
- **Problems Performing Familiar Tasks.** Everyday tasks like cooking and cleaning become hard to accomplish because the person either gets confused, forgets, or loses interest.
- **Trouble with Abstract Thinking.** Numbers begin to produce a challenge, making it hard to keep track of finances. Have problems with intellectual thinking and board games.
- **Loss of Drive.** Begin to remove themselves from activities they once enjoyed and skip out on social functions; would rather sleep or watch television.
- **Misplacing Items.** Putting objects in unusual locations, like a toothbrush in the kitchen utensil drawer and not remembering doing it. May accuse others of items being stolen.

### What will happen as our loved one's disease begins to progress? *The 7 Stages of Alzheimer's Disease, from the Alzheimer's Association*

#### Stage 1: No cognitive impairment

Unimpaired individuals experience no memory problems and none are evident to a health care professional during a medical interview.

**Stage 2: Very mild decline**

Individuals at this stage feel as if they have memory lapses, forgetting familiar words or names or the location of keys, eyeglasses or other everyday objects. Not yet evident during a medical examination.

**Stage 3: Mild cognitive decline**

Friends, family or co-workers begin to notice deficiencies. Problems with memory or concentration may be measurable in clinical testing or discernible during a detailed medical interview.

**Stage 4: Moderate cognitive decline**

(Mild or early-stage Alzheimer's disease)

At this stage, a careful medical interview detects clear-cut deficiencies in the following areas: decreased knowledge of recent events, decreased capacity to perform complex tasks, such as planning dinner for guests, paying bills, managing finances and reduced memory of personal history.

**Stage 5: Moderately severe cognitive decline**

(Moderate or mid-stage Alzheimer's disease)

Major gaps in memory and deficits in cognitive function emerge. Some assistance with day-to-day activities becomes essential.

**Stage 6: Severe cognitive decline**

(Moderately severe or mid-stage Alzheimer's disease)

Memory difficulties continue to worsen, significant personality changes may emerge, and affected individuals need extensive help with daily activities.

**Stage 7: Very severe cognitive decline**

(Severe or late-stage Alzheimer's disease)

This is the final stage of the disease when individuals lose the ability to respond to their environment, the ability to speak, and, ultimately, the ability to control movement.

**What to do when your loved one has been diagnosed:**

1. Schedule an appointment with the doctor to evaluate your loved one, asking any questions that you may have.
2. Meet with your family letting them know of the diagnosis and discussing possibilities of home caring. Divide up responsibilities and tasks that family members can help with.
3. Do more research on what Alzheimer's entails and how your loved one will be affected.
4. Begin setting up a structured routine to help your loved one
5. Be sure to make sure each caregiver is taking enough time in the day to care for themselves, especially the primary caregiver. Know the signs of [caregiver burnout](#).

*For more, please see our [Alzheimer's Caregiving to do list](#).*

**Here are some tips to communicating:**

- When talking, make sure you have their attention, call their name until they look up at you, giving you eye contact
- Repeat the question or statement, if needed
- Make sure there is no background noise that may affect their hearing or concentration
- Never talk about the person in front of the person, they are still capable of understanding what you are saying
- Avoid talking in a baby voice or down to the person
- Don't worry if they cannot remember who you are, just kindly explain who you are and try wearing a name tag
- Never criticize them for not understanding

- Politely help them come up with a word if they are having trouble thinking of it
- Ask them to point to something they are referring to, or give them a pad of paper to draw the object

**Focus on what they can do:**

- Find activities that they can still participate in, avoid crossword puzzles or board games that require intellectual thinking
- Try simplifying hobbies that they once enjoyed in the past, for instance if they liked baking, have them measure items out for a recipe
- Look through scrapbooks and photo albums together and discuss matter-of-factly past memories, avoid asking them if they remember a specific event
- Listen to music or watch their favorite television show or movie with them
- Give them encouragement and praise when they do something correct
- Let them complete tasks on their own pace

**Caregiver Support:**

It is important to know that not only will the life of the person with Alzheimer's change, but those caring for their loved one will change as well. The same expectations that you once had for birthday parties, holidays and other family events may change. The caregiver will need support and time alone as well.

*For more information, please visit the following websites:*

1. Alzheimer's Association- (link) <http://www.alz.org/index.asp>
2. Alzheimer's Foundation of America- (link) <http://www.alzfdn.org/AboutAlzheimers/definition.html>
3. Mayo Clinic (link) [www.mayoclinic.com/health/alzheimers-disease/DS00161](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/alzheimers-disease/DS00161)