

Alzheimer's Disease – What It Is and Symptoms

What is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's is a progressive brain disorder that gradually impairs memory, thinking, and behavior. It's the most common form of dementia, accounting for up to 80% of dementia cases.

Symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life.
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks.
- Confusion with time or place.
- Trouble with words in speaking or writing.
- Personality or mood changes.

Diagnosing Alzheimer's Disease

Diagnosis involves cognitive and memory tests (such as MMSE or MoCA), brain imaging (MRI or CT scans), and blood tests to rule out other conditions. Neurologists and specialists perform these evaluations.

Alzheimer's Diagnosis – Now What?

Hold a Family Meeting

It's essential to have an open conversation about the diagnosis, planning for care, and defining roles for family members.

Educate Yourself and Family Members

Learn about Alzheimer's to better understand the progression and challenges of the disease.

Helpful Websites

- **Alzheimer's Association:** www.alz.org
- **National Institute on Aging:** www.nia.nih.gov
- **Alzheimer's Foundation of America:** www.alzfdn.org
- **Dementia Action Alliance:** www.daanow.org

Popular Books on Alzheimer's

- *The 36-Hour Day* by Nancy L. Mace and Peter V. Rabins
- *Learning to Speak Alzheimer's* by Joanne Koenig Coste
- *Creating Moments of Joy* by Jolene Brackey
- *The Alzheimer's Solution* by Dean and Ayesha Sherzai
- *Still Alice* by Lisa Genova
- *A Loving Approach to Dementia Care* by Laura Wayman

Legal Planning

Why Legal Planning is Important

It's crucial to get legal matters in order early in the progression of the disease. Key areas include:

- **Power of Attorney** for financial decisions.
- **Healthcare Proxy** for medical decisions.
- **Estate Planning** to protect assets.

Adult Day Care Centers and Memory Cafes

What is an Adult Day Program for Alzheimer's?

An adult day program for individuals with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia provides a safe, structured environment where participants can engage in social and therapeutic activities during the day. These programs offer care and supervision while focusing on stimulating cognitive function, promoting physical activity, and encouraging social interaction. Activities are tailored to the needs and abilities of participants and may include music, art therapy, memory games, exercise, and meals.

Benefits for the Individual:

- **Cognitive Stimulation:** Structured activities help maintain cognitive abilities and slow the progression of memory loss.
- **Physical Activity:** Gentle exercises and activities improve mobility and overall health.
- **Social Interaction:** Engagement with peers reduces isolation and promotes a sense of belonging.
- **Safe Supervision:** Trained staff provide care, ensuring the individual is safe and supported throughout the day.
- **Routine and Structure:** Daily routines are comforting for those with memory impairments, reducing anxiety and confusion.

Benefits for the Caregiver:

- **Respite:** Caregivers receive much-needed breaks, allowing them time for personal activities or work while knowing their loved one is in a safe, caring environment.
- **Reduced Burnout:** Regular breaks from caregiving responsibilities help prevent emotional and physical exhaustion.
- **Peace of Mind:** Caregivers can rest assured that their loved one is being cared for in a professional, supportive setting.

What is a Memory Café?

A memory café is a relaxed, social setting where individuals with memory loss and their caregivers can come together to participate in activities, share experiences, and enjoy each

other's company. These cafés typically offer casual social activities like music, crafts, or light games, creating an inclusive environment where everyone feels welcome.

Benefits for the Individual:

- **Social Engagement:** Memory cafés offer an opportunity to interact with others in a safe and non-judgmental environment, which helps combat loneliness and isolation.
- **Familiar Activities:** Engaging in familiar, enjoyable activities can stimulate memory and promote a sense of comfort and happiness.
- **Maintaining Connections:** It helps individuals maintain social connections and remain part of the community.

Benefits for the Caregiver:

- **Shared Experiences:** Caregivers connect with others who are facing similar challenges, providing a sense of camaraderie and support.
- **Emotional Support:** Memory cafés often foster a supportive community where caregivers can share advice, tips, and coping strategies.
- **Quality Time:** Caregivers and their loved ones can enjoy time together in a stress-free environment, without the typical caregiving demands

Home Care – Private Pay Services

What is Private Pay Home Care?

Private pay home care services provide personal care, companionship, and support with daily activities like bathing, dressing, and meal preparation. These services are typically paid for out-of-pocket and can be customized to meet the needs of the individual.

Assisted Living Memory Care

What is Assisted Living Memory Care?

Assisted living memory care provides a safe, structured environment for individuals with Alzheimer's or dementia. These communities offer specialized care, secure facilities, and daily activities designed to support cognitive function.

When is it Time to Move a Loved One?

It may be time to consider memory care when:

- The individual's safety is at risk due to wandering or confusion.
- Caregiver burnout becomes overwhelming.
- 24-hour supervision and specialized care are needed.

When To Take the Keys Away

Many individuals with dementia believe they can still drive, particularly if they only drive short distances or haven't gotten lost. However, while getting lost is a concern, the bigger issue is the decline in brain function and reflexes. Dementia affects reaction times, decision-making, and the ability to handle unexpected situations on the road, all of which can lead to dangerous accidents.

Why Driving with Dementia is Risky

Dementia impairs cognitive functions crucial for safe driving, including:

- **Judgment:** The ability to make quick, appropriate decisions in traffic.
- **Reaction Time:** Delayed responses to hazards, such as stopping suddenly or swerving.
- **Spatial Awareness:** Difficulty judging distances and navigating turns.
- **Memory:** Forgetting where they are or the rules of the road, even on familiar routes.

How to Have the Conversation

1. Empathize and Acknowledge Their Feelings

Many people with dementia will feel a deep sense of loss when they can no longer drive. Acknowledge their feelings and explain that the decision is about keeping them—and others—safe.

2. Focus on Safety, Not the Disease

Frame the conversation around safety concerns, not their cognitive decline. For example: “I know you’re a great driver, but driving has become risky. I’d feel so much better if you didn’t have to worry about it anymore.”

3. Offer Alternatives

Suggest other ways they can get around, such as rides from family members, friends, or transportation services. Reassure them that they’ll still have their independence but in a safer way.

4. Involve a Healthcare Professional

If your loved one is resistant, a doctor or neurologist may be able to reinforce the need to stop driving.

How to Get Tested

If your loved one is still unsure about their driving abilities, a formal driving assessment can help. Spaulding Rehabilitation offers driving tests and includes a cognitive test and driving test that ranges from \$250-\$500. Many rehabilitation centers offer comprehensive testing to assess cognitive and physical skills related to driving. The assessment includes:

- **Cognitive Evaluation:** Tests memory, decision-making, and attention.
- **Reaction Time Testing:** Assesses how quickly someone responds to changes in traffic conditions.

- **On-Road Testing:** A certified driving instructor observes your loved one's driving in real-world conditions.

Testing Sites for Ability to Drive: Spaulding Rehabilitation Centers

Primary Care Physicians need to write a script for occupational therapy, including driving assessment, to get tested. Rehabilitation offers driver evaluation services at multiple locations.

Hospice Care

What is Hospice Care?

Hospice care focuses on comfort and quality of life for individuals nearing the end of life. It provides physical, emotional, and spiritual support for both patients and their families.