

EDUCATION SERIES:

Memory Loss

Alzheimer's, Dementia, Old Age - What is it?



There is a great deal of confusion, even in the medical community, about memory loss and various types of dementia. Is it Alzheimer's or Dementia? Dementia is a general term used to describe many different diseases. Dementia is the syndrome of symptoms such as memory loss and decreasing ability to handle the daily functions of life. Dementia is not an early form of Alzheimer's or some less serious disease, it is simply a catch-all term that describes Alzheimer's, Vascular Dementia, and other specific diseases.

Alzheimer's is frequently used because people may not have a specific diagnosis yet or due to the fact that many of the symptoms are common in any type of dementia. Because professionals often interchange the terms for general discussion purposes, people have become confused about the distinctions. Types of dementia may include Alzheimer's, Lewy Body Disease, Pick's Disease, Parkinson's related dementia, and Vascular Dementia. Alzheimer's is the most common type, and Vascular Dementia is second most common. Some people suffer from more than one type of dementia.

What's Normal?

Normal aging can cause some minor changes in memory or learning, but not in a way that affects functioning. If you know someone who repeats questions frequently, has trouble following their daily routine, frequently cannot find the right word, or is disoriented to time and place, these are signs of Alzheimer's or another type of dementia—not normal aging. It is important to get a good diagnosis, because there are some reversible causes of these symptoms. Depression, medication misuse or side effects, thyroid problems, and vitamin deficiencies can all present symptoms similar to Alzheimer's. It is important to get a thorough medical workup if you identify these symptoms. See below for warning signs compared to normal age related changes.

Help for Alzheimer's Caregivers:

Aging Wisely is a good place to start if you have concerns that a loved one might have some form of dementia, or if your loved one has been diagnosed. A care manager can help in the early stages by coordinating medical professionals, securing a good diagnostic workup, walking you through what to expect and options, and planning ahead. Often, families have trouble because their loved one does not wish to acknowledge there is a problem and they do not know how to get them to accept help, or even go to a doctor for an evaluation. A care manager can be invaluable in strategizing ways to work through these challenges. Our services are customized to work with just these types of situations. signs compared to normal age related changes.

As the disease progresses, your care manager can be your caregiving coach and resource partner. Our job is to anticipate needs and issues and help you plan, as well as to be a sounding board to your frustrations and concerns. There are many issues that may arise: the need for in home help, wandering, driving concerns, knowing when it may be time to consider a care facility, navigating the Medicare and insurance maze, respite care—we're here to help with them all. [See back for Alzheimer's Warning Signs.](#)

Warning Signs of Possible Alzheimer's or other form of Dementia:

- 1. Memory loss.** Forgetting recently learned information is one of the most common early signs of dementia. A person begins to forget more often and is unable to recall the information later.
What's normal? Forgetting names or appointments occasionally.
- 2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks.** People with dementia often find it hard to plan or complete everyday tasks including personal grooming and household management. Individuals may lose track of the steps involved in preparing a meal, placing a telephone call or playing a game.
What's normal? Occasionally forgetting why you came into a room or what you planned to say.
- 3. Problems with language.** People with Alzheimer's disease often forget simple words or substitute unusual words, making their speech or writing hard to understand. They may be unable to find the toothbrush, for example, and instead ask for "that thing for my mouth."
What's normal? Sometimes having trouble finding the right word.
- 4. Disorientation to time and place.** People with Alzheimer's disease can become lost in their own neighborhood, forget where they are and how they got there, and not know how to get back home.
What's normal? Forgetting the day of the week or where you were going.
- 5. Poor or decreased judgment.** Those with Alzheimer's may dress inappropriately, wearing several layers on a warm day or little clothing in the cold. They may show poor judgment, like giving away large sums of money to telemarketers.
What's normal? Making a questionable or debatable decision from time to time.
- 6. Problems with abstract thinking.** Someone with Alzheimer's disease may have unusual difficulty performing complex mental tasks, like forgetting what numbers are for and how they should be used.
What's normal? Finding it challenging to balance a checkbook.
- 7. Misplacing things.** A person with Alzheimer's disease may put things in unusual places: an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl.
What's normal? Misplacing keys or a wallet temporarily.
- 8. Changes in mood or behavior.** Someone with Alzheimer's disease may show rapid mood swings - from calm to tears to anger – for no apparent reason.
What's normal? Occasionally feeling sad or moody.
- 9. Changes in personality.** The personalities of people with dementia can change dramatically. They may become extremely confused, suspicious, fearful or dependent on a family member.
What's normal? People's personalities do change somewhat with age.
- 10. Loss of initiative.** A person with Alzheimer's disease may become very passive, sitting in front of the TV for hours, sleeping more than usual or not wanting to do usual activities.
What's normal? Sometimes feeling weary of work or social obligations.

We encourage you to seek a diagnostic workup if you see these signs in yourself or a loved one. Early diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or other disorders causing dementia is an important step to getting appropriate treatment, care and support services. These warning signs and other information can be found through the Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org).

Aging Wisely®

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