

DEMENTIA & ALZHEIMER'S CARE

June 2024

DEMENTIA

- **Dementia** is an organic mental disorder involving a general loss of intellectual abilities and changes in the personality. (Organic in this sense means the disorder is caused by physical changes in the brain.) Dementia is a brain disorder that seriously affects a person's ability to carry out daily activities. It involves the parts of the brain that control thought, memory and language. Healthy brain tissue dies or deteriorates, causing a steady decline in memory and mental abilities.

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

- **Alzheimer's disease** is the most common form of dementia with 60% to 80% of dementia being diagnosed as Alzheimer's. Approximately 6.7 million Americans have Alzheimer's. It is the seventh leading cause of Death in the United States. Late onset Alzheimer's occurs after age 65 and is the most common type. Early onset Alzheimer's occurs between age 30 to the mid-60's, with less than 10% of Alzheimer's being early onset. Both early and late onset Alzheimer's have genetic components. A child whose biological parent carries this genetic mutation has a very strong probability of developing early onset Alzheimer's.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

You will recognize the following signs in many patients with dementia:

- **Memory loss:**
 - Increasing and persistent forgetfulness
 - Affects recent memories the most
 - Makes it difficult to learn anything new or to follow instructions
- **Language loss (the meaning of words):**
 - Makes it difficult to recognize words and understand complex sentences
 - Makes it difficult to express ideas
 - May use inappropriate words or curse words

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS CONT.

- **Attention loss:**

- Unable to start or stop a task
- Pacing and agitation. Agitation often is a symptom of underlying illness or pain. Medication can also cause agitation, as can changes in the environment.
- Easily distracted

- **Judgement loss:**

- Cannot accurately assess circumstances that may be dangerous
- Unable to see consequences of action
- Difficulties with abstract thinking or complex tasks. Balancing a checkbook, recognizing and understanding numbers, or reading may be impossible

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS CONT.

- **Loss of perception or senses:**
 - Unable to recognize things or people
 - Misinterpretation of what is seen, heard or felt
- **Disorientation, delusions or hallucinations.** A person with hallucinations sees, hears or feels things that are not there. A person with delusions believes strongly in something that is not true, such as believing he has been captured by enemies.
- **Loss of muscle organization:**
 - Unable to perform multiple-step tasks
 - Require prompts or cues for routine tasks
- Difficulty performing familiar activities such as brushing teeth or bathing

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS CONT.

- **Depression** may show itself in some of the following ways:
 - Wandering
 - Anxiety-this can be caused by noise, feeling rushed and large groups
 - Weight loss
 - Sleep disturbance
- **Personality changes** such as irritability, anxiety, pacing and restlessness

COMMUNICATION TIPS

- Be open, friendly and gentle at all times.
- Always address the person by name to get his or her attention at the beginning of the interaction.
- Give your full attention to the conversation or task. This helps the client stay focused.
- Briefly introduce yourself and offer some cues when you approach, stating your name and relationship and the purpose of your visit.
- Speak slowly, but do not speak down.
- Avoid arguing and attempts to reason with a person who is upset. Acknowledge the client's feelings and gently distract him or her with something calming, pleasant and friendly.

CARING FOR DEMENTIA PATIENTS

- **Structure**-Serenity and stability reduce behavior problems. When a person with Alzheimer's becomes upset, the ability to think clearly declines even more. Follow a regular daily routine. Plan the schedule to match the person's normal, preferred routine and find the best time of day to do things, when the person is capable.
- **Bathing**- Some people with Alzheimer's won't mind bathing. For others it is a confusing, frightening experience. Plan the bath close to the same time every day. Be patient and calm. Allow the patient to do as much of the bath as possible. Never leave the patient alone in the bath or shower.
- **Dressing**-Allow extra time so the patient won't feel rushed. Encourage the patient to do as much of the dressing as possible.

CARING FOR DEMENTIA PATIENTS CONT.

- **Eating**- Some patients will need encouragement to eat, while others will eat all the time. A quiet, calm atmosphere may help the patient focus on a meal. Finger foods will help those who struggle with utensils.
- **Incontinence**- Set a routine for taking the patient to the bathroom, such as every 2-3 hours during the day. Don't wait for the patient to ask. Many people with Alzheimer's experience incontinence as the disease progresses. Be understanding when accidents occur.
- **Environment**- Make the environment familiar and safe. Set the water heater no higher than 120 degrees. Keep medicines and any other potentially dangerous items out of reach.
- **Night ritual**- Behavior is often worse at night. Create a ritual that is calming. Soothing music is helpful for some. Leave a night light on to reduce confusion and restlessness.

IDEAS FOR DEALING WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS

- **Sundown syndrome:** Many patients with Alzheimer's are more agitated, confused or restless in the late afternoon or early evening. Research shows the following things help:
 - Leave lights on and shut out darkness by closing the blinds and shades.
 - Provide more activity earlier in the day. This will use up energy, reducing stress.
 - Schedule essential activities and appointments early in the day.
 - Encourage an afternoon nap everyday. This reduces fatigue and agitation.
 - Warm, relaxing baths, foot soaks or massage may help.
 - Reduce activity and distractions toward the end of the day.
 - Discourage evening visits and outings
 - Avoid overstimulation. Turn off the television or radio before speaking to the patient.

IDEAS FOR DEALING WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS CONT.

- **Hiding, hoarding and rummaging.** These common problems can be disturbing to caregivers and to others the Alzheimer's patient lives with. Try the following strategies:
 - Lock doors and closets
 - Put a sign that says "NO" on places you want to keep the person out of, such as certain rooms, closets, or drawers.
 - Watch for patterns. If the patient keeps taking the same things, give them one of their own.
 - Don't leave things lying around in the open.
 - Make duplicates of important items like keys and glasses.
 - Look through waste cans when something is lost before emptying it.
 - Patients with Alzheimer's tend to have a favorite hiding place for things. Look for patterns.

IDEAS FOR DEALING WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS CONT.

- **Wandering-** First, find out if the patient needs something. Look for patterns in the wandering and possible reasons, such as time of day, hunger, thirst, boredom, restlessness, need to go to the bathroom, medication side effect, overstimulation or looking for lost items. Help keep the patient safe by trying the following things:
 - Remind the patient to use the bathroom every two hours.
 - Have a healthy snack and a pitcher of water readily available.
 - Provide a quiet environment away from noise, distraction and glaring light.
 - Provide a purposeful activity such as folding clothes or dusting.
 - Provide an outlet such as a walk, a social activity, a memory book or classical music played through headphones.
 - Give the patient stuffed animals to cuddle.
 - Motion sensors can be used in hallways.
 - Use child-resistant lock on doors and windows

IDEAS FOR DEALING WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS CONT.

- **Aggression and agitation.** First be sure that the person is not ill or in physical pain, such as from an infection or injury. Then try the following suggestions:
 - Maintain a calm environment.
 - Reduce triggers such as noise, glare, television or too many tasks.
 - Check for hunger, thirst or a full bladder.
 - Make calm, positive, reassuring statements.
 - Change the subject or redirect the person's attention.
 - Give the person a choice between two options.
 - Don't argue, raise your voice, restrain, criticize, demand or make sudden movements.
 - Don't take it personally if the person accuses or insults you.