

Alzheimer's Dementia: A Guide for Patients & Families

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive brain disorder that affects memory, thinking, behavior, and the ability to perform everyday tasks. It is the most common cause of dementia in older adults.

Signs & Symptoms to Watch For

Common Cognitive Symptoms

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Difficulty planning or solving problems
- Trouble completing familiar tasks
- Confusion with time or place
- New problems with words in speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Poor judgment or decision-making
- Withdrawal from work or social activities

Behavioral & Emotional Changes

- Mood swings, depression, or apathy
- Increased anxiety or agitation
- Becoming easily upset when routine is changed

Typical Presentation & Progression

Early Stage

- Mild memory lapses
- Difficulty remembering recent events
- Slight trouble with judgment or planning

Middle Stage

- Increasing forgetfulness
- Confusion about time or place
- Trouble recognizing friends and family
- Behavioral changes
- Greater need for assistance with daily tasks

Late Stage

- Severe memory loss
- Losing ability to communicate
- Dependency for most daily activities
- Increased risk of infections and other health complications

Medications FDA-Approved for Cognitive Symptoms

Symptom-Targeted Medications

- Donepezil (Aricept®) — for mild to severe Alzheimer’s dementia
- Galantamine (Razadyne®) — for mild to moderate Alzheimer’s dementia
- Rivastigmine (Exelon®) — mild to moderate Alzheimer’s dementia
- Memantine (Namenda®) — moderate to severe Alzheimer’s dementia
- Memantine + donepezil (Namzaric®) — combination therapy for moderate to severe disease

Disease-Modifying Therapies

- Lecanemab (Leqembi®) — for early Alzheimer’s/mild dementia
- Donanemab (Kisunla®) — for early symptomatic Alzheimer’s dementia

Diagnostic Tests Your Healthcare Team May Use

Clinical & Cognitive Evaluation

- Detailed medical history and symptom review
- Cognitive screening (e.g., Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA)) — a 30-point test to assess memory, attention, language, and executive function. Scores below 26 suggest cognitive impairment.

Laboratory Tests

- Blood tests (thyroid function, vitamin deficiencies, infections)
- Emerging blood biomarkers (amyloid, tau), available in select centers

Imaging Studies

- MRI or CT — rule out stroke, tumor, or structural issues; may show brain shrinkage.
- PET scans — measure brain metabolism or amyloid/tau proteins in research/clinical settings.

Planning for the Future

Healthcare Planning

- Discuss goals of care early, while your loved one can express preferences.
- Establish advance directives and a healthcare power of attorney.
- Consider palliative care support as symptoms progress.

Legal & Financial Planning

- Appoint durable financial power of attorney.
- Review insurance, long-term care options, and eligibility for programs like Medicare/Medicaid.
- Research trusted elder-care attorneys if possible.

Support for Caregivers

- Establish routines, respite resources, support groups, and caregiver education early.
- Reach out to national and local organizations for guidance and support.

National Organizations & Resources

✓ Alzheimer's Association 24/7 Helpline

☎ 800-272-3900 | 🌐 alz.org — support, education, local services, and care resources.

✓ Alzheimers.gov

🌐 alzheimers.gov — federal information on Alzheimer's and caregiving.

✓ National Institute on Aging (NIA) – Alzheimer's & dementia information

☎ 800-438-4380 | 🌐 nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers

✓ Alzheimer's & Dementia Resource Centers

Local support through community aging networks and Area Agencies on Aging.

✓ Eldercare Locator

☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 eldercare.acl.gov

✓ Advance Care Planning Resources

🌐 caringinfo.org

Final Notes

- Early recognition and diagnosis help families plan and access support.
- Medications can help symptoms and, in some cases, modestly slow decline, but they don't reverse the disease.
- Support for caregivers is essential — both for the person with Alzheimer's and those who care for them.