

Alcohol-Related Dementia: A Guide for Patients & Families

Alcohol-related dementia (ARD) is a cognitive disorder caused by long-term, excessive alcohol consumption, which leads to changes in the brain that impair memory, thinking, and decision-making. It is a form of dementia commonly seen in older adults with a history of heavy alcohol use.

Signs & Symptoms to Watch For

Common Cognitive Symptoms

- Difficulty with memory and recalling recent events
- Trouble with decision-making and judgment
- Challenges with completing daily tasks independently
- Confusion with time and place
- Problems with language and speaking clearly
- Misplacing items and difficulty retracing steps

Behavioral & Emotional Changes

- Mood swings or irritability
- Depression or feelings of hopelessness
- Anxiety or agitation, especially during routine changes

Typical Presentation & Progression

Early Stage

- Mild forgetfulness and confusion about recent events
- Subtle difficulty with decision-making and problem-solving
- Decreased ability to follow conversations and recall names

Middle Stage

- Increasing difficulty with memory and orientation (e.g., losing track of time)
- Trouble recognizing family members or close friends
- More pronounced behavioral changes, such as depression or agitation
- Increased need for assistance with daily activities

Late Stage

- Severe memory loss and difficulty recognizing familiar people or places
- Inability to communicate effectively
- Complete dependence for most daily tasks
- Increased vulnerability to infections and other health complications

Medications FDA-Approved for Cognitive Symptoms

Symptom-Targeted Medications

- No specific medications are approved solely for Alcohol-Related Dementia.
- Medications may be prescribed to address co-occurring symptoms such as depression or anxiety.
- For managing behavioral symptoms, antipsychotics or antidepressants may be considered on a case-by-case basis (note: these medications may not be FDA-approved for dementia treatment specifically).

Disease-Modifying Therapies

- Currently, no disease-modifying therapies are approved for Alcohol-Related Dementia.

Diagnostic Tests Your Healthcare Team May Use

Clinical & Cognitive Evaluation

- Detailed review of medical history, alcohol consumption, and symptoms
- Cognitive testing to assess memory, language, and executive function

Laboratory Tests

- Blood tests to rule out vitamin deficiencies, liver function, or other contributing factors
- Testing for potential neurological changes related to alcohol abuse

Imaging Studies

- MRI or CT to detect changes in brain structure, such as brain shrinkage or damage caused by long-term alcohol use
- PET scans may be used in some research settings to analyze brain metabolism

Planning for the Future

Healthcare Planning

- Discuss care preferences and goals while the individual is able to communicate them
- Set up advance directives and healthcare power of attorney
- Consider palliative care support as the condition progresses

Legal & Financial Planning

- Appoint a durable financial power of attorney
- Review long-term care options and insurance
- Consult an elder-care attorney to explore financial and legal protections

Support for Caregivers

- Establish regular routines and respite resources
- Utilize caregiver education and support groups to manage caregiving tasks
- Reach out to national and local organizations for guidance and resources

National Organizations & Resources

- ✓ ****Alzheimer's Association 24/7 Helpline****
☎ 800-272-3900 | 🌐 alz.org
- ✓ ****National Institute on Aging (NIA) - Alzheimer's & Dementia Information****
☎ 800-438-4380 | 🌐 nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers
- ✓ ****Eldercare Locator****
☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 eldercare.acl.gov
- ✓ ****National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)****
☎ 1-800-662-HELP | 🌐 niaaa.nih.gov
- ✓ ****Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)****
☎ 1-800-662-HELP (4357) | 🌐 samhsa.gov

Final Notes

- Early detection and intervention can improve quality of life and slow further decline.
- Alcohol-related dementia can be managed through a combination of medical care and supportive therapies.
- Caregiver support is critical — ensure caregivers have access to resources to prevent burnout and maintain their own health.