

Stages of Alzheimer's disease

Alzheimer's disease progresses in stages with a range of symptoms that increase in severity over time. Because the disease affects people in different ways, the rate of progression will vary. On average, a person with Alzheimer's may live four to eight years after diagnosis, but some people live as long as 20 years.

It is important to seek a diagnosis as early as possible. The earlier a person is diagnosed, the more treatment options will be available to them. Some medications are only effective in the early stages of the disease. To learn more about these drugs, including the different types available, who is eligible and potential side effects, visit [alz.org/medications](https://www.alz.org/medications).

The following descriptions provide a general idea of changes at each stage and should only be used as a general guide. Stages of Alzheimer's may overlap, which can make it difficult to know which stage a person is in.

As abilities change through the progression of the disease, it's important to focus more on what a person can still do rather than what they cannot, so that the person can live as well as possible with dementia.

Asymptomatic

On the earliest end of the continuum are people who are asymptomatic (i.e., without symptoms). This means that they have the biological changes of the disease in their brain but do not show any cognitive symptoms. Research is underway to learn more about these early changes, which could yield critical new findings about prevention.

Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) due to Alzheimer's disease

Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) is an early stage of memory loss or other loss of cognitive ability in individuals who can still independently perform most activities of daily living. MCI can develop for multiple reasons, and some individuals living with MCI may go on to develop dementia while others will not. MCI can be an early stage of Alzheimer's disease if hallmark changes in the brain, such as beta-amyloid buildup, are present. Symptoms of MCI can include:

- Forgetting important information such as appointments, conversations or recent events.
- Difficulty with making sound decisions, judging the time or recalling a sequence of steps needed to complete a complex task.

Early stage (mild dementia due to Alzheimer's disease)

If hallmark changes in the brain are present, the person may progress into dementia due to Alzheimer's disease. Dementia due to Alzheimer's disease can be further divided into three stages: early, middle and late — with a progressive loss of independence in each stage.

In the early stage, a person may function independently. They may still drive, work and take part in social activities. Despite this, the person may feel as if they are having memory lapses, such as forgetting familiar words or the location of everyday objects. Symptoms may not be widely apparent at this stage, but family and close friends may take notice and a doctor would be able to identify symptoms using certain diagnostic tools.

A person in the early stage will typically start to experience symptoms that interfere with some daily activities, such as:

- Problems coming up with the right word or name for something.
- Trouble remembering names when introduced to new people.
- Difficulty with familiar tasks.
- Forgetting something that was just read.
- Losing or misplacing something valuable.
- Increasing trouble with planning or organizing.
- Getting lost in familiar places.

During the early stage, it's possible for people with dementia to live well by taking control of their health and wellness, exploring potential treatment options with their doctor, and focusing their energy on aspects of their life that are most meaningful to them. In addition, this is the ideal time to put legal, financial and end-of-life plans in place because the person with dementia will be able to participate in decision-making.

Middle stage (moderate dementia due to Alzheimer's disease)

In the middle stage, symptoms are more pronounced and will interfere with many of the person's daily activities. This is typically the longest stage of the disease and can last for many years. As the disease progresses, the person living with Alzheimer's will require a greater level of care. During this stage, the person may confuse words, get frustrated or angry, and act in unexpected ways, such as refusing to bathe. Damage to nerve cells in the brain can also make it difficult for the person to express thoughts and perform routine tasks without assistance.

Symptoms, which vary from person to person, may include:

- Forgetting events or one's own personal history.
- Feeling frustrated, angry or withdrawn, especially in socially or mentally challenging situations.
- Being unable to recall information about themselves like their address or telephone number, and the high school or college they attended.
- Confusion about where they are or the day of the week.
- Needing help to choose the right clothes for the weather or occasion.
- Trouble controlling bladder and bowels.
- Changes in sleep patterns, such as sleeping during the day and becoming restless at night.
- A higher risk of wandering and becoming lost.
- Personality and behavioral changes, such as becoming suspicious or delusional, believing that others are lying, or, repeating a behavior over and over.

In the middle stage, the person living with Alzheimer's can still participate in daily activities with assistance. It's important to find out what the person can still do or find ways to simplify tasks. As the need for more intensive care increases, caregivers may want to consider respite care or an adult day center so they can have a temporary break from caregiving while the person living with Alzheimer's continues to receive care in a safe environment.

Late stage (severe dementia due to Alzheimer's disease)

In the late stage, major personality changes can occur, and a person will experience symptoms that interfere with most daily activities. Individuals lose the ability to respond to their environment, to carry on a conversation and, eventually, to control movement. They may still say words or phrases, but communicating pain becomes difficult. As memory and cognitive skills further decline, personality changes may take place and individuals need extensive care.

In this stage, individuals may:

- Require around-the-clock assistance with daily personal care.
- Lose awareness of recent experiences as well as of their surroundings.
- Experience changes in physical abilities, including walking, sitting and, eventually, swallowing.
- Have difficulty communicating.
- Be at higher risk of infections, especially pneumonia.

The person living with Alzheimer's may not be able to initiate engagement as much during the late stage, but they can still benefit from interaction in ways that are appropriate, like listening to relaxing music or receiving reassurance through gentle touch. During this stage, caregivers may want to use support services, such as hospice care, which focus on providing comfort and dignity at the end of life. Hospice can be of great benefit to people in the final stages of Alzheimer's and other dementias and their families.

Resources

- To learn more about the stages of Alzheimer's disease, visit alz.org/stages.
- To learn more about caregiving and options for care, visit alz.org/care.
- To find resources in your area, visit the Alzheimer's Association & AARP Community Resource Finder at alz.org/CRF.

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