



“I wish I had known about you...”

SUPPORT IS RIGHT HERE AT OUR AREA CHAPTER ALZHEIMER'S ASSOCIATION CENTRAL AND WESTERN VIRGINIA

The Alzheimer's Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer's research, care and support. Their mission is to eliminate Alzheimer's disease through the advancement of research, provide and enhance care and support for all affected, and reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health. The Alzheimer's Association Central and Western Virginia Chapter serves 51 counties and cities including Blacksburg, Charlottesville, Culpeper, Lynchburg, Harrisonburg, Roanoke and Danville.

The Central and Western Virginia Chapter helps those who have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or

related dementias, as well as their caregivers and families. This assistance comes in the form of a toll-free Helpline, support groups and care consultation in each region, lending libraries, Medic Alert + Safe Return, an annual education conference as well as many other programs and services.

What Is Dementia?

Dementia is a general term for a decline in mental ability severe enough to interfere with daily life. Memory loss is an example.

Dementia is not a specific disease. It's an overall term that describes a wide range of symptoms associated with a decline in memory or other thinking skills severe

enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities.

Alzheimer's is the most common type of dementia, accounting for 60 to 80 percent of cases. Alzheimer's is a brain disease that causes a slow decline in memory, thinking and reasoning skills. Vascular dementia, which occurs after a stroke, is the second most common dementia type. But there are many other conditions that can cause symptoms of dementia, including some that are reversible, such as thyroid problems and vitamin deficiencies.

Dementia is often incorrectly referred to as "senility" or "senile dementia," which reflects the formerly widespread but incorrect belief that serious mental decline is a normal part of aging.

Memory loss and other symptoms of dementia

While symptoms of dementia can vary greatly, at least two of the following core mental functions must be significantly impaired to be considered dementia:

- Memory
- Communication and language
- Ability to focus and pay attention
- Reasoning and judgment
- Visual perception

People with dementia may have problems with short-term memory, keeping track of a purse or wallet, paying bills, planning and preparing meals, remembering appointments or traveling out of the neighborhood.

Many dementias are progressive, meaning symptoms start out slowly and gradually get worse. If you or a loved one is experiencing memory difficulties or other changes in thinking skills, don't ignore them. See a doctor soon to determine the cause. Professional evaluation may detect a treatable condition. And even if symptoms suggest dementia, early diagnosis allows a person to get the maximum benefit from available treatments and provides an opportunity to volunteer for clinical trials or studies. It also provides time to plan for the future.

10 warning signs and symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease

Every individual may experience one or more of these signs in a different degree. If you notice any of them, please see a doctor.

1. Memory Loss That Disrupts Daily Life

One of the most common signs of Alzheimer's is memory loss, especially forgetting recently-learned information. Others include forgetting important dates

or events; asking for the same information over and over; increasingly needing to rely on memory aids (e.g., reminder notes or electronic devices) or family members for things they used to handle on their own.

What's a typical age-related change?

Sometimes forgetting names or appointments, but remembering them later.

2. Challenges In Planning Or Solving Problems

Some people may experience changes in their ability to develop and follow a plan or work with numbers. They may have trouble following a familiar recipe or keeping track of monthly bills. They may have difficulty concentrating and take much longer to do things than they did before.

What's a typical age-related change?

Making occasional errors when balancing a checkbook.

3. Difficulty Completing Familiar Tasks

People with Alzheimer's often find it hard to complete daily tasks. Sometimes, people may have trouble driving to a familiar location, managing a budget at work or remembering the rules of a favorite game.

What's a typical age-related change?

Occasionally needing help to use the settings on a microwave or to record a television show.

4. Confusion With Time Or Place

People with Alzheimer's can lose track of dates, seasons and the passage of time. They may have trouble understanding something if it is not happening immediately. Sometimes they may forget where they are or how they got there.

What's a typical age-related change?

Getting confused about the day of the week but figuring it out later.

5. Trouble Understanding Visual Images And Spatial Relationships

For some people, having vision problems is a sign of Alzheimer's. They may have difficulty reading, judging distance and determining color or contrast, which may cause problems with driving.

What's a typical age-related change?

Vision changes related to cataracts.

6. New Problems With Words In Speaking Or Writing

People with Alzheimer's may have trouble following or joining a conversation. They may stop in the middle of a conversation and have no idea how to

continue or they may repeat themselves. They may struggle with vocabulary, have problems finding the right word or call things by the wrong name (e.g., calling a "watch" a "hand-clock").

What's a typical age-related change?

Sometimes having trouble finding the right word.

7. Misplacing Things And Losing the Ability to Retrace Steps

A person with Alzheimer's disease may put things in unusual places. They may lose things and be unable to go back over their steps to find them again. Sometimes, they may accuse others of stealing. This may occur more frequently over time.

What's a typical age-related change?

Misplacing things from time to time and retracing steps to find them.

8. Decreased or Poor Judgment

People with Alzheimer's may experience changes in judgment or decision-making. For example, they may use poor judgment when dealing with money, giving large amounts to telemarketers. They may pay less attention to grooming or keeping themselves clean.

What's a typical age-related change?

Making a bad decision once in a while.

9. Withdrawal From Work or Social Activities

A person with Alzheimer's may start to remove themselves from hobbies, social activities, work projects or sports. They may have trouble keeping up with a favorite sports team or remembering how to complete a favorite hobby. They may also avoid being social because of the changes they have experienced.

What's a typical age-related change?

Sometimes feeling weary of work, family and social obligations.

10. Changes In Mood And Personality

The mood and personalities of people with Alzheimer's can change. They can become confused, suspicious, depressed, fearful or anxious. They may be easily upset at home, at work, with friends or in places where they are out of their comfort zone.

What's a typical age-related change?

Developing very specific ways of doing things and becoming irritable when a routine is disrupted.

There are many different causes of memory problems. If you or a loved one is experiencing troubling symptoms, visit a

doctor to learn the reason. Some causes of dementia-like symptoms can be reversed.

Dementia is caused by damage to brain cells. This damage interferes with the ability of brain cells to communicate with each other. When brain cells cannot communicate normally, thinking, behavior and feelings can be affected.

The brain has many distinct regions, each of which is responsible for different functions (for example, memory, judgment and movement). When cells in a particular region are damaged, that region cannot carry out its functions normally.

Different types of dementia are associated with particular types of brain cell damage in particular regions of the brain. For example, in Alzheimer's disease, high levels of certain proteins inside and outside brain cells make it hard for brain cells to stay healthy and to communicate with each other. The brain region called the hippocampus is the center of learning

Many people have memory loss issues—this does not mean they have Alzheimer's or another dementia

and memory in the brain, and the brain cells in this region are often the first to be damaged. That's why memory loss is often one of the earliest symptoms of Alzheimer's.

While most changes in the brain that cause dementia are permanent and worsen over time, thinking and memory problems caused by depression, medical side effects, excess use of alcohol, thyroid problems or vitamin deficiencies may improve when the condition is addressed.

Diagnosis of dementia

There is no one test to determine if someone has dementia.

Doctors diagnose Alzheimer's and other types of dementia based on a careful medical history, a physical examination, laboratory tests, and the characteristic changes in thinking, day-to-day function and behavior associated with each type. Doctors can determine that a person has dementia with a high level of certainty. But it's harder to determine the exact type of dementia because the symptoms and brain changes of different dementias can overlap. In some cases, a doctor may diagnose "dementia" and not specify a type. If this occurs it may be necessary to see a specialist such as a neurologist or geropsychologist.

Dementia treatment and care

Treatment of dementia depends on its cause. In the case of most progressive dementias, including Alzheimer's disease, there is no cure and no treatment that slows or stops its progression. But there are drug treatments that may temporarily improve symptoms. The same medications used to treat Alzheimer's are among the drugs sometimes prescribed to help with symptoms of other types of dementias. Non-drug therapies can also alleviate some symptoms of dementia.

Ultimately, the path to effective new treatments for dementia is through increased research funding and increased participation in clinical studies.

Dementia risk and prevention

Some risk factors for dementia, such as age and genetics, cannot be changed. But researchers continue to explore the impact of other risk factors on brain health and prevention of dementia. Some of the most active areas of research in risk reduction and prevention include cardiovascular factors, physical fitness, and diet.

Cardiovascular risk factors: Your brain is nourished by one of your body's richest networks of blood vessels. Anything that damages blood vessels anywhere in your body can damage blood vessels in your brain, depriving brain cells of vital food and oxygen. Blood vessel changes in the brain are linked to vascular dementia. They often are present along with changes caused by other types of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease and dementia with Lewy bodies. These changes may interact to cause faster decline or make impairments more severe. You can help protect your brain with some of the same strategies that protect your heart—don't smoke; take steps to keep your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar within recommended limits; and maintain a healthy weight.

Physical exercise: Regular physical exercise may help lower the risk of some types of dementia. Evidence suggests exercise may directly benefit brain cells by increasing blood and oxygen flow to the brain.

Diet: What you eat may have its greatest impact on brain health through its effect on heart health. The best current evidence suggests that heart-healthy eating patterns, such as the Mediterranean diet, also may help protect the brain. A Mediterranean diet includes relatively little red meat and emphasizes whole grains, fruits and vegetables, fish and shellfish, and nuts, olive oil and other healthy fats.



Overview of disease progression

The symptoms of Alzheimer's disease worsen over time, although the rate at which the disease progresses varies. On average, a person with Alzheimer's lives four to eight years after diagnosis, but can live as long as 20 years, depending on other factors.

The stages below provide an overall idea of how abilities change once symptoms appear and should only be used as a general guide. They are separated into three different categories: mild Alzheimer's disease, moderate Alzheimer's disease and severe Alzheimer's disease. Be aware that it may be difficult to place a person with Alzheimer's in a specific stage as stages may overlap.

Mild Alzheimer's disease (early-stage):

In the early stage of Alzheimer's, a person may function independently. He or she may still drive, work and be part of social activities. Despite this, the person may feel as if he or she is having memory lapses, such as forgetting familiar words or the location of everyday objects.

Friends, family or others close to the individual begin to notice difficulties. During a detailed medical interview, doctors may be able to detect problems in memory or concentration. Common difficulties include:

- Problems coming up with the right word or name
- Trouble remembering names when introduced to new people

- Challenges performing tasks in social or work settings
- Forgetting material that one has just read
- Losing or misplacing a valuable object
- Increasing trouble with planning or organizing

Moderate Alzheimer's disease (middle-stage):

Moderate Alzheimer's is typically the longest stage and can last for many years. As the disease progresses, the person with Alzheimer's will require a greater level of care.

You may notice the person with Alzheimer's confusing words, getting frustrated or angry, or acting in unexpected ways, such as refusing to bathe. Damage to nerve cells in the brain can make it difficult to express thoughts and perform routine tasks. At this point, symptoms will be noticeable to others and may include:

- Forgetfulness of events or about one's own personal history
- Feeling moody or withdrawn, especially in socially or mentally challenging situations
- Being unable to recall their own address or telephone number or the high school or college from which they graduated

- Confusion about where they are or what day it is
- The need for help choosing proper clothing for the season or the occasion
- Trouble controlling bladder and bowels in some individuals
- Changes in sleep patterns, such as sleeping during the day and becoming restless at night
- An increased risk of wandering and becoming lost
- Personality and behavioral changes, including suspiciousness and delusions or compulsive, repetitive behavior like hand-wringing or tissue shredding

Severe Alzheimer's disease (late-stage):

In the final stage of this disease, 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 continue to worsen, significant personality changes may take place and individuals need extensive help with daily activities. At this stage, individuals may:

- Need round-the-clock assistance with daily activities and personal care

- Lose awareness of recent experiences as well as of their surroundings
- Experience changes in physical abilities, including the ability to walk, sit and, eventually, swallow
- Have increasing difficulty communicating
- Become vulnerable to infections, especially pneumonia

One of the things The Alzheimer's Association Central and Western Virginia hears most often is **"I wish I had known about you sooner."** They know that living with Alzheimer's can be overwhelming at times, for both the patient and their caregivers. The staff at the Alzheimer's Association Helpline is highly trained and knowledgeable about all aspects of Alzheimer's disease, from treatment options, caregiver options, and services available in your community. They are a tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) nonprofit, donor-supported organization, with programs and services are made possible through contributions from individuals, corporations and foundations. They are available to help at their Helpline 24 hours a day, seven days a week at 1-800-272-3900 and online at www.alz.org/cwva.

HELPLINE

The Alzheimer's Association Helpline operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in 140 languages. The staff is highly trained and knowledgeable about all aspects of Alzheimer's disease. Call 800-272-3900 if you have questions about:

Alzheimer's disease or memory loss, medications and treatment options, brain health and care options

How the Association can help you

Caregiving tips and respite care options

Services available in your community and referrals

You can also call for emotional support—as often as you need. They know that living with Alzheimer's can be overwhelming at times. Remember, we are here for you—all day, every day.

If you prefer, send a message to amarrs@alz.org. A response to your inquiry will be returned within 24 hours. Alzheimer's Association Central and Western Virginia
1160 Pepsi Place, Suite 306, Charlottesville
www.alz.org/cwva

Care and support services are available, making it easier for you and your family to live the best life possible with Alzheimer's or dementia

24/7 Helpline: 1-800-272-3900

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