

# | Alzheimer's Disease Resource Sheet

People with Alzheimer's disease have unique needs and can continue to live at home throughout its progression. Even an extension of six to 12 months at home can benefit people with Alzheimer's disease and their families.

ComForCare understands the disease's progression and redesigns plans as our clients' needs change to help them live at home as long as possible and feel at home no matter where they live.

## Science Behind the Condition

Your brain is made of approximately 100 billion nerve cells called neurons. Neurons gather and transmit electrochemical signals. Think of them tossing and catching messages to help you think, feel, move and function in everyday life. In Alzheimer's, brain damage is widespread, as many neurons stop functioning, lose connections with other neurons, wither and die. While the brain typically shrinks slightly as a result of healthy aging, a brain with Alzheimer's disease loses a significantly greater number of neurons, causing it to shrink to 1/3 of its original size by the end of the disease.

Alzheimer's disease, the most common type of dementia, causes memory loss, confusion, changes in personality, and gradual loss of independence.

The cause of Alzheimer's disease is unknown. Genes, environment, lifestyle, and overall health may play roles. There is no cure or disease-altering treatment yet.<sup>1</sup>

Healthcare providers and caregivers often focus treatment on maximizing skills and abilities in every stage and enhancing quality of life for everyone involved.

## Hallmarks of Condition

Alzheimer's disease usually affects people older than 65. A minority have "young-onset" Alzheimer's disease, which starts in one's 30s or 40s.

The order of changes or "path" of Alzheimer's disease is fairly predictable. Often, a first noticeable change is short-term memory loss.<sup>2</sup>

People live with Alzheimer's disease, on average, for approximately eight years after symptoms appear. But, progression may be quicker or slower. Some live as many as 20 years with the disease.



## Journey

Stages of Alzheimer's disease can be measured as: mild (early stage), moderate (middle stage) or severe (late stage). Each stage brings new challenges:

- **Mild Stage.** Besides memory loss, other common symptoms include trouble handling money and paying bills, repeating questions, taking longer to complete normal daily tasks and personality and behavior changes. Most experience a change in insight and may overestimate their abilities, placing a person at risk of wandering and getting lost even in the early stage.
- **Moderate Stage.** Memory loss and confusion worsen, and people begin to have problems recognizing family and friends. Learning new things, carrying out steps in a task and coping with new situations are challenging tasks. In addition, hallucinations, delusions and paranoia may happen more frequently. Incontinence is prevalent. Communication is more difficult, as is understanding time and place.
- **Late Stage.** As the brain continues to shrink, communication is limited to only a few words or sounds. The person is completely dependent on others for personal care. Near the end of the disease, the immune system is compromised, so frequent recurring infections are common.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, brain changes are so extensive that individuals can no longer control their movements, and automatic functions like swallowing are compromised.

## Effective Home Care Strategies

Seeing the world from the perspective of those with Alzheimer's disease helps us create days that are more meaningful, safe, and pleasant for everyone. While the days can be long, working with someone's remaining strengths can create better days. Consider these strategies for effective support in the home:

- Break down tasks into doable steps
- Follow a daily routine—  
but be ready to flexible
- Provide supervision for safety
- Communicate with empathy
- Engage in familiar activities
- Secure medications
- Redirect challenging behavior
- Accept their reality
- Listen to favorite music
- Leverage preserved skills
- Remove mirrors if they're confusing
- Give the person more time to think and speak
- Use visual aids to provide cues
- Encourage exercise such as getting out; going for a walk if possible

## Things to Avoid

Because Alzheimer's disease impacts memory, reasoning and judgement, avoid these actions to create better days:

- Arguing
- Correcting
- Expecting the person to do all they used to do
- Doing everything yourself



**Contact your local ComForCare** office for additional resources, support for family caregivers, and specialized home care for people living with dementia.