

Navigating the Diagnosis of Early Alzheimer's



A Comprehensive Guide to Living With the Disease



PRESBYTERIAN
SENIOR LIVING

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Introduction

Learning that you or a senior loved one has Alzheimer's disease can create a gamut of emotions ranging from fear to overwhelm. But understanding the disease and knowing how to navigate it can make a significant difference in quality of life. Early Alzheimer's disease is a challenging journey, but timely proactive management can have a lasting impact.

In the early stages of Alzheimer's, you may notice subtle changes in memory, abstract thought, judgment, and daily function. These changes can be disconcerting, but with the right tools and support, it's possible to adapt and thrive.



Inside this Guide

This guide covers a range of topics, including effective communication, lifestyle adjustments, cognitive exercises, and ways to build a supportive environment. We also talk about safety issues and offer tips to plan for the future.

Our aim is to empower you with knowledge and resources that can help you or your family member navigate this journey with confidence and resilience. Whether you are a person living with early Alzheimer's or a caregiver, this guide will provide you with insights and practical steps to manage the changes and maintain the best quality of life possible.





Managing Early-Stage Alzheimer's

Navigating the earliest stages of Alzheimer's disease involves watching for new symptoms and disease progression, leveraging the latest research for potential treatment options, ensuring safety, and assembling a supportive care team. Let's take a closer look at each of these.

Learn What the Latest Research Shows

Older adults and their family members often find Alzheimer's research to be frustratingly slow and lacking in results. But scientists do believe they are making progress. This is especially true when it comes to symptom management. Current projects include using the immune system to target plaques associated with the disease, reducing the amount of beta-amyloid in the brain, decreasing inflammation, and examining the head-heart connection.

One tip for families interested in staying current with research is to sign up for emails from the [Critical Path Institute](#). While their information might be a little clinical in nature, the organization is a collaborative effort dedicated to improving the lives of people with Alzheimer's.

Know the Most Common Disease-related Changes

As a senior's disease progresses, the impact of the diagnosis becomes more obvious. While memory loss will likely be present from the earliest stages, additional changes can include trouble managing finances, difficulty completing tasks that require abstract thought, and repeating questions. A person with Alzheimer's might also experience a change in disposition, such as becoming easily tearful or agitated.





Some disease-related symptoms that appear with time are more troubling. Those can include wandering and becoming lost, even in familiar places. A loss of judgment can also put the senior's well-being in danger.

By learning more about how Alzheimer's typically progresses, families can be better prepared. The Alzheimer's Association has some great resources for self-education, including the [Stages of Disease](#) section of their website.

Assemble a Support Team

Another proactive step seniors and families should take when a loved one is diagnosed with Alzheimer's is to put together a caregiving team. While a spouse or an adult child might be the primary caregiver initially, as the disease progresses, it becomes difficult for one person to manage alone. Now is a good time to explore other options, such as friendly-visitor programs through your religious organization, in-home care agencies, and respite care at a nearby assisted living or memory care community.

You'll also want to have a team of professionals you feel confident in. That often includes a geriatrician or primary care doctor and a neurologist. Others that might be helpful are a psychiatrist who can assist with depression (a common issue), a nutritionist, and even a sleep disorders specialist.



Evaluate the House for Safety

Finally, it's also a good idea to identify and remedy potential hazards in the home. Alzheimer's causes changes to the body that can create safety issues for a senior around their house. Evaluating the home of a senior with Alzheimer's for safety involves several key steps:

- Clear pathways of clutter and trip hazards, like throw rugs, extension cords, and stacks of books or magazines.
- Place motion-activated night-lights in rooms and hallways used most often to reduce the risk for falls.
- Install grab bars in bathrooms, at the bedside, and possibly even near their favorite chair in the living room.



Because judgment can be compromised as the disease follows its usual course, it's important to plan for that, too. Check that all cleaning products, chemicals, and medications are stored safely out of reach. Add childproof locks to cabinets where potential hazards are kept.

If you don't already have one, consider installing a monitored home alarm system with a GPS tracking bracelet or pendant. While they might not need it right away, there will likely come a time when it will be necessary.





Exploring Memory Aids and Tools

Another essential step to take to help an adult with early-stage Alzheimer's live their best quality of life is to investigate ways to help accommodate disease-related changes. Here are a few for seniors and their families to explore:

Consider Interactive and Desktop Calendars:

When an adult is living with memory loss, keeping track of routine daily tasks and appointments can be challenging. Initially, a senior might be able to utilize a large print desktop calendar with important events of the day listed. With time, they may need something more comprehensive. There are a variety of apps and systems available, such as [MapHabit](#), [It's Done!](#), and [Day & Date Reminder Clocks](#).

Investigate Medication Management Options:

Another challenge for people with a memory impairment is staying on track with medications. Fortunately, there are both low- and high-tech solutions to test out.

You can find inexpensive pill organizers at the local pharmacy that can hold a week or month of medications. Another possibility is to have their pharmacy set up what is known as a punch card, which provides medicines prepackaged by day and time. Finally, there are [electronic medication systems](#) that work on wireless technology. These can sound an alarm at dosage time and even text a family member if a medication is missed.





Label Cabinets, Closets, and More:

Memory care communities often use labeling systems to make it easier for adults with Alzheimer’s disease to feel more independent. It’s a tactic you can easily employ at home. Two examples are placing an image of a glass on a kitchen cupboard or a fork on the utensil drawer. A picture of a toilet on the bathroom door and a bed on the bedroom door are two additional examples.

Once a senior’s disease moves beyond the early stages, families often find it helps to use “STOP” signs as well. These can be placed on doors you don’t want the senior to enter, such as to the outdoors or the garage.

Put Together Memory Books:

Another aid that people with Alzheimer’s might find helpful is a memory book. These can be created around a variety of topics. For example, it’s common for a senior with memory loss to have difficulty connecting names with faces. They might recognize faces and know the person is familiar to them but be unable to recall their name. A memory book with photos of family and friends, labeled with their names and relationships to the senior, could be helpful. You could even include older photos of important events, such as weddings and graduations.





Protecting Against Further Cognitive Decline

While researchers still have much to learn about Alzheimer's disease, most agree that there are some steps you can take to protect against further cognitive decline or to slow its progression. Engaging in regular physical exercise, which boosts brain health, is one. Eating a healthy diet is another. Here are a few suggestions to consider:



Prioritize Routine Physical Fitness:

Engaging in regular physical activity may help delay the progression of Alzheimer's disease by improving blood flow and reducing inflammation. Exercise stimulates the release of growth factors and supports cognitive function, potentially slowing cognitive decline and preserving memory in those at risk for or already affected by the disease. Even 20 minutes of exercise three or four times a week might help. Walking, chair yoga, and resistance bands are a few forms of fitness to explore.

Stay Connected and Social:

Staying socially active by connecting with friends and participating in community activities is important. These social interactions stimulate mental agility and emotional well-being, which is believed to help protect brain health. One tip to keep in mind is that a senior with memory loss might be self-conscious if they struggle to keep up their end of a conversation. Help put them at ease by being patient and empathetic.





Engage in Mentally Stimulating Activities:

Helping people with Alzheimer's engage in mentally stimulating activities can support cognitive function and improve quality of life. Some activities that can be beneficial are puzzles, arts and crafts, music therapy, baking, and gardening.

Adopt a Healthy Diet:

For someone with Alzheimer's, a healthy diet should include brain-boosting foods. Incorporate leafy greens, berries, nuts, and fish rich in omega-3s into menus. Opt for whole grains and lean proteins, while also reducing the amount of saturated fats and added sugars in meals. Hydration is another key.

The Mediterranean diet has been linked to lower incidences of a variety of health issues, including Alzheimer's, some forms of cancer, and heart disease. Investing in a home-delivered meal service might be helpful for people with Alzheimer's and their caregivers. Medical News Today's [review of Mediterranean meal services](#) might help you evaluate the options.



Creating a Structured Daily Routine

Routine and structure provide adults with Alzheimer’s a sense of predictability and stability, reducing some of the confusion and anxiety that come from being unable to count on their memory. Having consistent patterns helps people better manage daily tasks and maintain a sense of normalcy.



Familiar routines also support cognitive function and emotional well-being, making daily life more manageable and less stressful. Here are a few tips for accomplishing that:

Establish Routines for Meals, Activities, and Rest:

While it may not be possible every day, the more frequently you can stick to a schedule, the more likely it is the person with memory loss will feel in control. Establish times for waking up, going to bed, eating meals, and taking walks or engaging in other fitness activities. It will help to incorporate smaller tasks into the plan for the day, too. That might include brushing teeth, making the bed, and having a snack.

Explore Options to Support Security:

This is one of the biggest challenges families face when a loved one has Alzheimer’s. It only takes the senior leaving home and becoming lost once for something unfortunate to happen to them. Don’t wait for a crisis to explore safety resources—take a proactive approach. As previously mentioned, consider installing a home security system. Talk with the alarm company to see what options they have available for a GPS pendant or bracelet. If they don’t have one, there are vendors that offer products that work on wireless technology. Some even allow the wearer to be tracked in real time in the event they can’t be located.





Plan Now for Future Needs

Safety isn't the only matter families need to plan ahead for. There are also financial, legal, and care needs to take into consideration. While having conversations about these topics can be difficult and even uncomfortable, it's the best way to allow your senior loved one to express their future wishes.

Address Financial Matters:

Family elders may have grown up in households where money wasn't discussed. But it's important that spouses and adult children have an understanding of their loved one's finances before it's too late. For example, if your husband has always handled financial matters and has now been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, you'll need to sit down and review everything. You'll likely need to create a budget that includes how you'll handle it if you need to hire outside caregivers or transition the senior to a memory care community.

Prepare for Legal Concerns:

This is also the time to make sure all legal documents and plans are in place. That means having more than just a will. Find an attorney who has experience in elder law issues, such as living trusts, durable power of attorney, life settlement funding, and reverse mortgages.

Learn About Memory Care Communities:

Lastly, you'll also want to investigate local [memory care communities](#). This specialized level of care is designed to help people with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia live their best quality of life. Look for those with a person-centered approach to care and a commitment to continuing education for their caregivers.



At PSL campuses, for example, our teams are committed to care that focuses on each resident's individual needs, and to creating an environment that supports success. Our caregivers are trained using the [Dementia Live and Compassionate Touch](#) program created by the Age-u-cate Training Institute. It's an immersive experience that helps team members learn what it's like to live with a cognitive impairment.

While there's currently no treatment to reverse the physical impact of Alzheimer's disease, following the steps outlined above might slow the progression and help the senior better manage their disease.

Conclusion

Managing early-stage Alzheimer's requires a proactive approach, combining planning for current needs with strategies for the future. Early intervention and adaptability can significantly enhance quality of life, ensuring individuals remain engaged and empowered as they navigate their journey with Alzheimer's.

A leading provider of memory care, PSL has locations in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and Ohio. We invite you to schedule a [visit to a community near you](#) to learn more!

Schedule a Visit to a PSL Community

The best way to learn more about the services, amenities, programs, and mission of a senior living community is by visiting in person. We invite you to call the PSL community nearest you to schedule a visit today!



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