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# Common Medical Problems in Alzheimer's Disease: Information for Caregivers

[Español](#)

A person with [Alzheimer's disease](#) may develop other medical problems over time, as we all do. These problems can cause confusion and [behavior changes](#). The person may not be able to tell you what is wrong. Watch for signs of illness and tell a doctor about what you see.

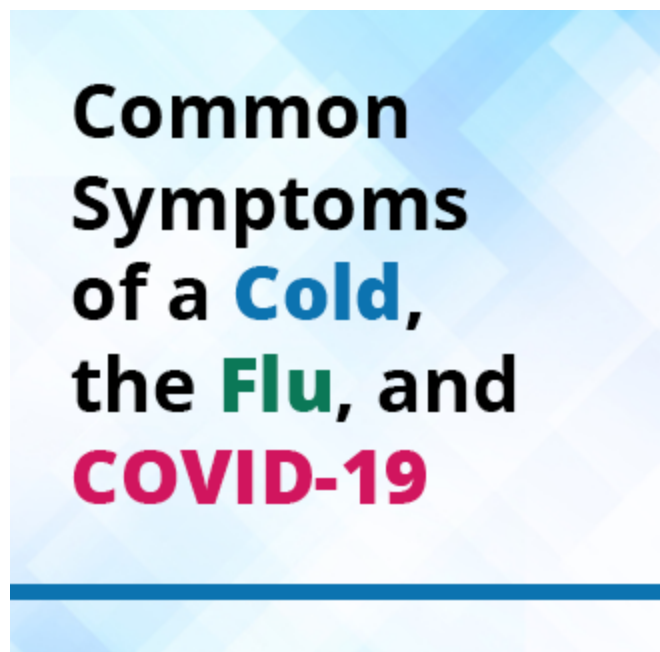
Explore the information on this page to learn about common medical problems people with Alzheimer's may develop and get tips for how to address them.



## Flu, pneumonia, and other respiratory illnesses

Respiratory illnesses such as [flu](#), pneumonia, the common cold, and COVID-19 can spread quickly from one person to another. Make sure the person with Alzheimer's stays up to date on all [recommended vaccinations](#), including their flu and COVID shots. Learn about the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's current vaccine recommendations](#) for older adults.

The common cold, flu, and COVID-19 all have similar symptoms, including sore throat, stuffy nose, and cough. If the person with Alzheimer's experiences any of these symptoms, visiting a health care provider can help them get an accurate diagnosis and treatment.



Read and share [this infographic](#) to learn about the signs of each of these

respiratory diseases.

## Dehydration

Our bodies must have a certain amount of water to work well. If a person is sick or doesn't drink enough fluid, they may become dehydrated. Dehydration may also occur in [hot weather](#) or in homes without air conditioning.

Look for the following signs of dehydration:

- [Dry mouth](#)
- Dizziness
- [Hallucinations](#) (which may also be caused by Alzheimer's itself)
- Rapid heart rate

Pay attention to how much fluid the person is drinking so that they stay hydrated. Talk to your doctor about how much fluid the person should aim to drink each day. If the person doesn't want to drink water, try juice, flavored water, broth, milk, or decaffeinated coffee or tea.

## Preventing falls

Because bones generally get weaker as people age, a fall is more likely to cause a fracture in older adults. People with Alzheimer's are at even greater risk of falling since they often experience changes in depth perception, which is the ability to judge how close or far away objects are. For example, a person with Alzheimer's may think that a change in floor pattern —such as carpet to tile — is a step, causing them to stumble or trip.

You can make changes in the home of the person with Alzheimer's to better ensure their safety. Learn more about [what causes falls and how to help prevent them](#).

## Constipation or diarrhea

People with Alzheimer's often experience changes in their bowel habits, including [constipation](#) (trouble having a bowel movement) and diarrhea (loose bowel movements). Constipation and diarrhea may be caused by changes in

diet, dehydration, certain medications, and in some cases, specific medical problems. If the person with Alzheimer's is experiencing constipation or diarrhea, you can:

- Encourage them to eat foods high in fiber, which can help ease both constipation and diarrhea. Foods such as dried apricots, raisins, prunes, some dry cereals, and whole-grain bread are high in fiber.
- Be aware of how much fluid the person drinks and help them stay hydrated.
- If possible, ensure the person gets [some physical activity](#), such as walking, each day.

[Let a health care provider know](#) if you notice a change in the person's bowel habits.

## Managing medicines for a person with Alzheimer's

Older adults often have multiple medical conditions and may take many medicines. Taking medicines the wrong way or mixing certain drugs and supplements can be dangerous. People with Alzheimer's often need help taking their medicines. See the tips below for ways to take medications safely:

- Be aware of all prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, dietary supplements, and herbal remedies the person takes.
- Keep a list of all medications. Include the time the person should take each medicine, how much they should take, and the reason it was prescribed.
- Set phone alerts or use a chart, calendar, or timer to remind you when it is time for the person to take medicines.
- Use a weekly pill organizer to help keep track of the person's medications.
- If the person lives alone, call to remind them to take their medicine.
- If the person has trouble swallowing, talk with a doctor or pharmacist about whether the medication is available in liquid

form. In some cases, you can crush pills and mix them with food, such as applesauce or yogurt, which may make them easier to swallow. However, some pills must be taken whole to work properly, so ask a health care provider before trying this.

- If the person is experiencing uncomfortable side effects from a medication, talk with a doctor or pharmacist. They may be able to prescribe a different medicine or help manage side effects in other ways. Remember that the person should not stop taking any medication without checking with their health care provider first.

To help you keep track of medicines for someone with Alzheimer's, fill out the [Managing Medications and Supplements worksheet](#).

## Incontinence

[Incontinence](#) means a person can't control their bladder and/or bowels. Most people with Alzheimer's will experience incontinence at some point. Incontinence can happen at any stage of this disease, but it is more often a problem in the later stages. Sometimes people with Alzheimer's can have accidents because they have trouble finding the bathroom or recognizing the toilet as a toilet. Incontinence may cause the person to feel shame or embarrassment.

Incontinence can be particularly challenging for caregivers, who may have to change clothes, underwear, or bedsheets frequently. A doctor can help figure out why incontinence is happening. In some cases, incontinence is caused by certain medications, a [urinary tract infection](#), an enlarged [prostate](#), [diabetes](#), or drinking caffeine. In these cases, the doctor may be able to treat the incontinence. In other cases, the incontinence cannot be treated.

Here are some tips to cope with incontinence:

- Limit fluids after 6 p.m. if problems happen at night. Give the person fresh fruit before bedtime instead of fluids if they are thirsty.
- Do not give the person caffeinated drinks such as regular coffee or tea.
- Remind the person to go to the bathroom every two to three hours and show them the way.
- Mark the bathroom door with a big sign that reads "Toilet" or "Bathroom."
- Make sure the person wears loose, comfortable clothing that is easy to remove.
- Use a stable toilet seat that is at a good height. A colorful toilet seat may help the person identify the toilet.
- Buy adult disposable briefs or underwear, washable bed protectors, and waterproof mattress covers to make accidents easier to clean up.
- Clean the skin after every leak or accident to avoid irritation and infection. Use a mild soap, rinse, and allow to air dry, if possible. After cleaning, apply moisturizer or petroleum jelly to protect the skin.

## Dental problems

As Alzheimer's gets worse, some people need help taking care of their [teeth or dentures](#). Be sure to take the person for routine dental checkups and check their mouth regularly for any problems, such as:

- Sores and lumps
- Tooth decay
- Food pocketed in the cheek or on the roof of the mouth

Get tips for helping a person with Alzheimer's [maintain good oral hygiene](#).

## Visiting the doctor

It's important that the person with Alzheimer's gets regular medical care. Make sure the person sees a health care professional on a regular basis. This is the best thing you can do to help prevent medical problems or manage them before they become serious. Here are some tips to help you get ready for a visit to the doctor's office:

- Make an appointment during the person's best time of day and when the office is not very crowded.
- Let the office staff know before the visit that the person has Alzheimer's. Ask them for help to make the visit go smoothly.
- If visiting the doctor makes the person with Alzheimer's nervous, don't tell them about the visit until the day of the appointment or even right before it is time to go. Be positive and matter of fact.
- Take something the person likes to eat or drink and any materials or activities they enjoy.

Read more suggestions for [taking someone to a doctor's appointment](#).

## You may also be interested in

- Discovering [the signs of Alzheimer's](#)
- Learning [how to prepare for a doctor's appointment](#)
- Reading about [taking a person with Alzheimer's to the hospital](#)

## For more information

### NIA Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

800-438-4380

[adear@nia.nih.gov](mailto:adear@nia.nih.gov)

[www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers](http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers)

The NIA ADEAR Center offers information and free print publications about Alzheimer's and related dementias for families, caregivers, and health professionals. ADEAR Center staff answer telephone, email, and written requests and make referrals to local and national resources.

### Alzheimers.gov

[www.alzheimers.gov](http://www.alzheimers.gov)

Explore the Alzheimers.gov website for information and resources on Alzheimer's and related dementias from across the federal government.

### Eldercare Locator

800-677-1116

[eldercarelocator@USAgings.org](mailto:eldercarelocator@USAgings.org)

<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

### Alzheimer's Association

800-272-3900

866-403-3073 (TTY)

[info@alz.org](mailto:info@alz.org)

[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

### Alzheimer's Foundation of America

866-232-8484

[info@alzfdn.org](mailto:info@alzfdn.org)

<https://alzfdn.org>

### Family Caregiver Alliance

800-445-8106

[info@caregiver.org](mailto:info@caregiver.org)

[www.caregiver.org](http://www.caregiver.org)

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