

Complications of Alzheimer's Disease (AD)

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a progressive disease that affects memory and cognitive function. AD is more common in people over the age of 65, but it can also affect younger adults. Symptoms such as forgetfulness and confusion are mild during the early stages of the disease, but they gradually worsen as the disease progresses and damage to the brain becomes more severe.

If you suspect that a loved one has AD, encourage them to see a doctor. Early diagnosis is important for improving cognitive health and slowing the progression of the disease. But even with treatment, your loved one may experience one or more complications of AD.

Alzheimer's disease complications

Restlessness and agitation

People diagnosed with AD commonly have periods of agitation and anxiousness. A loved one's ability to reason and understand certain situations can also decline as the disease progresses. If they can't make sense of a confusing world, they can become fearful and agitated.

You can do things to help a loved one feel safe and calm. You can start by providing a safe environment and removing any stressors that could cause agitation, such as loud noise. Some people with AD also become agitated when they're physically uncomfortable. Their agitation might increase if they're unable to speak or express how they feel. Take steps to make sure their pain, hunger, and thirst levels remain at a comfortable level. You can also calm agitation by reassuring them that they're safe.

Bladder and bowel problems

Bladder and bowel problems are other complications of AD. As the disease progresses, a loved one may no longer recognize the sensation of needing to use the bathroom. They may also be unable to respond quickly to urges. This can result from limited mobility or limited communication skills. A loved one may also become confused and use the restroom in inappropriate places, but you can help them cope.

If possible, remind your loved one to use the bathroom and offer help. You can also make it easier for them to get to the bathroom alone. Make sure they can easily remove clothing and install night lights to ensure they get to the bathroom safely at night.

If mobility is an issue, your loved one may appreciate a commode near their bed or undergarments for incontinence.

Depression

Some people with AD also have depression and don't know how to cope with a loss of cognitive functions. The symptoms of depression may include:

- sleeping problems
- changes in mood
- withdrawing from friends and relatives
- difficulty concentrating

The symptoms of depression can be similar to the general symptoms of AD. This can make it difficult to determine whether your loved one is experiencing depression or just the normal symptoms of AD. A doctor can refer your loved one to a geriatric psychiatrist to make this determination.

Treatment options for depression in people with AD include attending support groups and speaking with a therapist. Speaking to others with AD can also be helpful. Getting regular exercise and participating in activities they enjoy can also improve their mental outlook. In some cases, a doctor may recommend antidepressants.

Falls

AD can also affect balance and coordination. The risk of falling increases as the disease worsens. This can lead to head trauma and broken bones.

You can reduce your loved one's risk of falling by assisting them as they walk and making sure pathways are clear in their home. Some people with AD don't want to lose their independence. In this case, you might suggest walking aids to help them maintain their balance. If a loved one is home alone, get a medical alert device so they can contact emergency services if they fall and can't get to a phone.

Infections

AD can cause your loved one to lose control of normal body functions, and they may forget how to chew food and swallow. If this happens, they have an increased risk of inhaling food and drinks. This can cause pulmonary aspiration and pneumonia, which can be life-threatening.

You can help someone avoid this complication by making sure they eat and drink while sitting up with their head elevated. You can also cut their food into bite-size pieces to make swallowing easier. The symptoms of pneumonia include:

- a fever

- a cough
- shortness of breath
- excess phlegm

Pneumonia and other respiratory infections need medical treatment with antibiotics. If you notice that your loved one coughs after drinking, you should alert their doctor who may refer them to a speech therapist for further evaluation.

Wandering

Wandering is another common complication of AD. People with AD can experience restlessness and sleeplessness due to disruption in their normal sleep patterns. As a result, they may wander out of the home believing that they're running an errand or going to work. The problem, however, is that a loved one may leave home and forget their way back. Some people with AD wander from home at night when everyone is asleep.

Make sure your loved one wears a medical alert bracelet with:

- their name
- their address
- their phone number
- your contact information

You can also keep loved ones safe by installing an alarm system, deadbolts, and bells on the door.

Malnutrition and dehydration

It's important that your loved one eats and drinks enough fluids. However, this can be difficult because they may refuse to eat or drink as the disease progresses. Also, they may be unable to consume food and drinks because of difficulty swallowing.

The symptoms of dehydration include:

- a dry mouth
- headaches
- dry skin
- sleepiness
- irritability

Your loved one may be malnourished if they're losing weight, they have frequent infections, or they experience changes in their level of consciousness. Visit during mealtimes and help with preparing meals to ensure they don't experience dehydration or malnutrition. Observe your loved one eating and drinking to ensure they consume plenty of fluids. This includes water and other beverages, such as juice, milk, and tea. If you're concerned about dehydration or malnutrition, speak with their doctor.