



## Caring for Someone with Dementia

**PALOMAR HEALTH**  
Center for Behavioral Health

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Caring for someone with dementia can be overwhelming at times. It may mean dealing with a wide range of emotions and concerns. It requires commitment and patience as the person diagnosed will eventually need round-the-clock care. This booklet intends to give information to support both the person diagnosed and the family members and loved ones in coping with the challenges of this disease.

## What Is Dementia?

Dementia is a loss of brain function that occurs with certain diseases. It affects memory, thinking, language, judgment and behavior.

While memory loss is a common symptom of dementia, memory loss by itself does not mean that a person has dementia. Doctors diagnose dementia only if two or more brain functions – such as memory, language skills, perception or cognitive skills (including reasoning and judgment), are significantly impaired for at least 6 months.

Sudden onset of cognitive dysfunction that has only been seen for a few weeks is often termed delirium. Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) is the stage between normal forgetfulness due to aging and the development of dementia. Not everyone with MCI develops dementia.

Dementia is not a normal part of aging though it is most common at 60 years of age and older. About 5% to 8% of all people over the age of 65 have dementia. Dementia is a progressive disease and has no current cure, but treatments for symptoms are available and research continues.



# Stages of Dementia

## What to Expect During the Mild Stage

- Language problems, such as trouble finding the name of familiar objects
- Misplacing items
- Getting lost on familiar routes
- Personality changes and loss of social skills
- Losing interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Difficulty performing tasks that take some thought (learning new info, working a cell phone)

## What You Can Do to Help

- Outdoor activities may be therapeutic for them.
- Encourage them to join social activities (visiting friends, church and community gatherings).
- Keep a record of important things in a calendar or address book.
- Consider outside group activities designed for those with dementia (Adult Day Care programs or Senior Centers).
- Involve them in the decision making process regarding their future.
- Questions to consider asking:
  - Who will make healthcare and/or financial decisions when you are no longer able to do so?
  - How would you like your care needs met?
  - Where would you like to live?
- Legal documents are best taken care of at this time.

# What to Expect During the Moderate Stage

- Forgetting details about current events
- Forgetting events in their own life history
- Change in sleep patterns (wakes up at night)
- More difficulty reading and writing
- Poor judgment and poor safety awareness
- Speaks in confusing statements
- Withdrawing from social contact
- Having hallucinations, arguments, striking out, violent behavior, delusions, depression, agitation
- Difficulty doing BASIC tasks such as preparing meals, choosing proper clothing or driving

# What You Can Do to Help

- You may need to reorient the person to reality and set limits to his behavior.
- Keep a routine. Try to keep consistent daily times for activities such as waking up, mealtime, bathing and bedtime. Keeping these things at the same time and place helps to orient them.
- You can use cues to establish different times of the day like opening the curtains in the morning and putting on music at bedtime.
- Let the person know what to expect throughout the day. Step-by-step instruction is helpful.
- Involve the person in daily activities as much as possible.
- When communicating, make it simple. Pay attention to their body language and your own body language as well.
- Vary activities to stimulate different senses of sight, hearing, smell and touch. Start with the person's interests.
- Family and social events may be appropriate. Visitors can bring memorabilia or items that enhance their memory of the past.
- Be watchful of the person's safety.
- Be prepared to react positively to changes in the person's behavior like unusual outbursts, irritability or even hallucinations.
- Look into adult daycare and senior living facilities that specialize in taking care of patients with dementia.





## What to Expect During the Severe Stage

- Can no longer understand language
- Can no longer recognize family members
- Can no longer perform basic activities of daily living such as eating, dressing, bathing
- Incontinence & swallowing problems may occur
- Sleeping during the day and restless at night

## What You Can Do to Help

- Safety and physical health is the priority (nutrition, grooming and good sleep).
- Reorientation is less helpful because they are no longer able to comprehend. Conversation is directed towards making them happy and secure.
- They might love to do the things they used to do when they were a child (holding a toy, drawing, coloring, watching cartoons on TV).
- It is okay if they sleep most of the time, but keep a routine to walk or do passive exercises daily.
- There may be a huge burden for an in-home caregiver. Many people at this stage are cared for in nursing facilities.



# Dementia Differences and Treatments

## Irreversible Dementia – Symptoms

**Alzheimer's Dementia:** Possible cause is related to amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles in the brain. Usually starts later in life (after age 60) and is characterized by loss of memory and progresses slowly towards the severe stage. The person affected lives an average of 6 years after his symptoms become noticeable to others, but survival can range from 4–20 years, depending on age and other health conditions.

**Vascular Dementia:** Caused by many small strokes. Usually has a sudden onset and step-wise progression with neurological symptoms which vary depending on what part of the brain is affected.

**Lewy Body Dementia:** Due to abnormal protein structures in certain areas of the brain. Typically characterized by early appearance of dementia symptoms, accompanied by progression and hallucinations.

**Frontotemporal Dementia:** Occurs when the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain atrophy or shrink due to abnormalities called Pick's bodies. Usually starts earlier in life (between ages 40 and 65) and is characterized by early psychiatric symptoms followed later by cognitive impairments. Symptoms include apathy, poor social judgment, loss of language and bizarre behavior. The person affected lives an average of 8 years, with a survival range from 3–17 years.

## Irreversible Causes

- HIV/AIDS
- Huntington's Disease
- Lyme Disease
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Parkinson's Disease
- Pick's Disease
- Progressive Supranuclear Palsy

## Irreversible Dementia – Treatment Options

Medications to help control behavior problems caused by loss of judgment, increased impulsivity and confusion such as:

- Cognitive enhancers
- Antidepressants/anti-anxiety medications
- Mood stabilizers and antipsychotics
- Anti-dementia medications

## Reversible Causes of Dementia

- Brain Tumors
- Changes in Blood Sugar, Sodium and Calcium levels
- Low Vitamin B12 levels
- Normal pressure hydrocephalus
- Use of certain meds like Cimetidine and some Cholesterol-lowering meds
- Chronic Alcohol Abuse

## Reversible Dementia – Treatment Options

- Changing medications
- Correcting chemical imbalance or deficiencies
- Treating medical conditions



# Options for Evaluation

If you believe a loved one is experiencing any stage of dementia, there are several options for testing available.

## Cognitive Testing

Brief tests that can be done in 5–15 minutes. Scores must be interpreted in the context of the person's educational and other background, and the particular circumstances (highly depressed or in great pain):

- Abbreviated Mental Test Score (AMTS)
- Mini-Mental State Exam (MMSE)
- Modified Mini-Mental State Exam (3MS)
- Cognitive Abilities Screening Instrument (CASI)
- The Clock Drawing Test

## Lab Tests

These tests are done to rule out treatable causes:

- Vitamin B12
- Folic Acid
- TSH
- C-reactive Protein
- Complete Blood Count
- Electrolytes
- Calcium, Renal Function
- Liver Enzymes
- Testing for Alcohol may be indicated

## Imaging

Done to look at the brain for possible symptoms:

- CT Scan
- MRI
- SPECT
- PET Scans



## Contact Us

### Palomar Health Center for Behavioral Health

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## Follow Us





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