

# Progression

Alzheimer Society

## OVERVIEW

This document is one in a five-part series on the stages of Alzheimer's disease and is written for the person with the disease, their family and caregivers. This overview provides a summary of the stages and information on end-of-life issues. It also includes a modified Global Deterioration Scale<sup>1</sup> (GDS), a tool commonly used by health care providers to measure the progression of the disease and to classify symptoms often seen at each stage. Detailed information on each of the stages, including suggestions for living with the disease, can be found in four separate companion sheets entitled *The Progression of Alzheimer's Disease – Early Stage; Middle Stage; Late Stage; and End of Life*.

### What is Alzheimer's disease?

Dementia is an umbrella term for a variety of brain disorders. Symptoms include loss of memory, judgment and reasoning, and changes in mood and behaviour. Brain function is affected enough to interfere with a person's ability to work, maintain relationships or carry out everyday activities.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. Other forms of dementia resemble Alzheimer's disease in that they also involve a progressive degeneration of brain cells that is currently irreversible. They include Vascular Dementia (the second most common dementia after Alzheimer's disease), Frontotemporal Dementia, Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, Lewy body Dementia, Huntington disease, and Parkinson's disease. Alzheimer's disease is a disease of the brain, characterized by deterioration of thinking ability and of memory, caused by the progressive degeneration of brain cells. The disease also affects mood and emotions, behaviour and one's ability to perform activities of daily living. There is currently no cure for Alzheimer's disease nor can its progression be reversed. However, present treatment options and lifestyle choices can often significantly slow the progression of the disease.

Alzheimer's disease typically follows certain stages which will bring about changes in the person's and family's lives. Because the disease affects each individual differently, the symptoms, the order in which they appear and the duration of each stage vary from person to person. In most cases, the disease progresses slowly, and the symptoms of each stage may overlap, often making the move from one stage to another quite subtle.

### Approach to care

The approach to care that is reflected in this series is one that focuses on the person living with Alzheimer's disease. By understanding a person's life experiences, support systems, personality and ways of coping, the individual's physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs can be better met. While the person's needs change as the disease progresses, the basic needs for overall health and security, stimulation, connection, self-esteem and affection remain. At the forefront of a person-centred approach to care is the belief that each individual with Alzheimer's disease, like all human beings, deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

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<sup>1</sup> Reisberg, B., Ferris, S.H., de Leon, M.J., and Crook, T. (1982). *Global Deterioration Scale (GDS)*, American Journal of Psychiatry, 139:1136-1139.

A key point to remember is although a person loses many abilities as the disease progresses, it is important to focus on the abilities that remain. People in the early to middle stages of the disease can participate in decision-making and planning for the future and, with the person's wishes and values expressed early on, living with Alzheimer's disease can be less stressful. Throughout all stages of the disease, enjoying pleasurable pastimes and activities, and spending time with friends and family are important in stimulating the brain and fostering a positive attitude.

The approach to care greatly influences the individual's quality of life. The Alzheimer Society has developed *Guidelines for Care* to explain to people living with Alzheimer's disease, their families and caregivers the special type of care that is most supportive of people with the disease.

## Stages of Alzheimer's disease

The stages of Alzheimer's disease are commonly referred to as "early", "middle" and "late". Brief descriptions of these stages follow.

### 1. Early stage (stage 2, 3 Global Deterioration Scale)

The term "early stage" refers to individuals of any age who have mild impairment due to symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. Common symptoms include forgetfulness, communication difficulties, and changes in mood and behaviour. People in this stage retain many of their functional capabilities and require minimal assistance. They may have insight into their changing abilities, and, therefore, can inform others of their experience of living with the disease and help to plan and direct their future care.

*Please note that the term "early stage" refers to people of any age who have mild impairments as a result of Alzheimer's disease. This differs from the term "early onset" which refers to people who have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease at a younger age than usual, typically in their 50's or very early 60's.*

### 2. Middle stage (stage 4, 5, 6 Global Deterioration Scale)

This stage brings a greater decline in the person's cognitive and functional abilities. Memory and other cognitive abilities will continue to deteriorate although people at this stage may still have some awareness of their condition. Assistance with many daily tasks, such as shopping, homemaking, dressing, bathing and toileting will eventually become necessary.

### 3. Late stage (stage 7 Global Deterioration Scale)

In this stage, the person eventually becomes unable to communicate verbally or look after themselves. Care is required 24 hours a day. The goal of care at this stage is to continue to support the person to ensure the highest quality of life possible.

## End of life

When the person nears death, comfort measures become the focus. As in the care of any person living with a terminal illness, physical as well as emotional and spiritual needs must be carefully considered and attended to providing supportive care focuses on quality of life and comfort.

## The Global Deterioration Scale (GDS)

In addition to hearing the terms "early", "middle" and "late" stage Alzheimer's disease, you may also hear health care professionals use more clinical terminology and refer to the Global Deterioration Scale, also called the Reisberg Scale. The scale is used to measure the progression of Alzheimer's disease and divides the disease into seven stages. This scale is also used in diagnosing other dementias although the stages and symptoms vary from one dementia to another.

Stage	Typical Symptoms
<b>Stage 1:</b> No cognitive decline (normal function)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No memory problems</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 2:</b> Very mild cognitive decline (may be normal age related changes or earliest signs of Alzheimer's disease)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Memory lapses</li> <li>- Forgetting familiar names and locations of objects</li> <li>- These lapses are not typically obvious to others</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 3:</b> Mild cognitive decline (early stage Alzheimer's disease can be diagnosed in some, but not all individuals with these symptoms)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mild forgetfulness</li> <li>- Difficulty learning new things</li> <li>- Difficulty concentrating or limited attention span</li> <li>- Problems with orientation, such as getting lost</li> <li>- Communication difficulties such as finding the right word</li> <li>- Loss or misplacing of valuable objects</li> <li>- Difficulty handling problems at work</li> <li>- Issues are noticeable to family, friends or co-workers</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 4:</b> Moderate cognitive decline (mild or early stage Alzheimer's disease)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Some memory loss of one's personal history</li> <li>- Difficulty with complex tasks e.g., managing finances, shopping, travel</li> <li>- Decreased knowledge of current events and recent events</li> <li>- Impaired ability to perform challenging mental arithmetic (e.g., counting backward from 75 by 7)</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 5:</b> Moderately severe cognitive decline (moderate or mid-stage Alzheimer's disease)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Major gaps in memory e.g., phone numbers or names of close family members</li> <li>- Help is needed with day-to-day tasks</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 6:</b> Severe cognitive decline (moderately severe or mid-stage Alzheimer's disease)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continued memory loss e.g., occasionally forgetting the name of a spouse or primary caregiver</li> <li>- Loss of awareness of recent events and experiences in their lives e.g., not remembering what they had for lunch or their child's graduation</li> <li>- Assistance is needed with activities of daily living e.g., getting dressed, bathing</li> <li>- Difficulties counting</li> <li>- Personality and emotional changes such as confusion, anxiety, suspiciousness, anger, sadness/depression, hostility, apprehension, delusions and agitation</li> <li>- Obsessions such as repetition of simple activities</li> <li>- Disruption of normal sleep/waking cycle</li> <li>- Increasing episodes of incontinence</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 7:</b> Very severe cognitive decline (severe or late-stage Alzheimer's disease)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Severe cognitive impairment</li> <li>- Vocabulary becomes limited and verbal abilities eventually disappear</li> <li>- Loss of ability to walk independently and sit without support</li> <li>- Help is needed with eating and using the toilet; usually incontinent</li> </ul>

## What's next?

No matter what stage of the disease the person is experiencing, obtaining information and support are important components to understanding and living with the disease. Information found in the five-part progression series can help to ease the way of the Alzheimer journey.

## Help and support from the Alzheimer Society

Living with Alzheimer's disease at any stage can be challenging. Whether you are the person with the disease or someone who supports them, it is normal to feel a variety of emotions including grief and loss throughout all stages of the disease. It is important to acknowledge your feelings, care for yourself and seek the practical help and emotional support that you need.

The Alzheimer Society in your community can provide educational resources to help you learn more about the disease, referrals to help you access the practical support you need, and one-on-one and group support to help cope with the emotional impact of the disease. Contact your local Alzheimer Society or visit [www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca).

## Useful resources

*The Progression of Alzheimer's Disease* - Overview; Early Stage; Middle Stage; Late Stage; and End of Life information sheets. Alzheimer Society of Canada (2013)

To learn more about the **MediAlert® Safely-Home® program** or to register, please visit <http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/Living-with-dementia/Day-to-day-living/Safety/Safely-Home>.

The Alzheimer Society of Canada offers a wide variety of free information sheets and brochures. To learn more, please visit our resources section at <http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/We-can-help/Resources/Alzheimer-Society-brochures-and-publications>.

Note: This information sheet provides guidance but is not intended to replace the advice of a health care professional. Consult your health care provider about changes in the person's condition, or if you have questions or concerns.

# Alzheimer Society

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