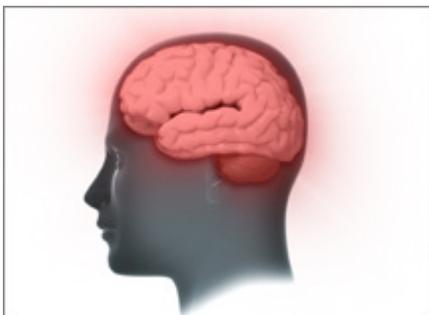


Dementia is not a specific disease. It's an overall term that describes a wide range of symptoms associated with a decline in memory or other thinking skills severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities. Alzheimer's disease accounts for 60-80 percent of cases.



Understanding Alzheimer's Disease

- The most important thing to remember is that people with Alzheimer's disease are still whole human beings. They like to have fun and have purpose in their lives just like anyone else.
- Alzheimer's is the most common type of dementia that causes problems with memory, thinking and behavior.
- There is no current cure, but treatments for symptoms are available and research continues.
- Short-term memory is the most obvious impairment among residents who have Alzheimer's. For example, a person may not be able to remember what they had for lunch today or who the last president was, but they can sing every word to a 1940's musical and tell you the name of the President Roosevelt's dog. This is because recent events do not "stick" in their heads. With Alzheimer's the "glue" that sticks events in one's memory doesn't work anymore. However, events that happened when the "glue" in their brains did still work are fastened in their brains and are available to be retrieved. Expecting people with Alzheimer's to remember recent events will only cause frustration for everyone in the conversation.

- Other symptoms associated with Alzheimer's can include difficulty in thinking of the right word to express what they want to say, difficulty problem solving, and lack of orientation to where they are or what time of day it is.
- Alzheimer's is not a normal part of aging and it worsens over time. Our residents are at various stages and some will be able to remember exactly who you are, why and when you are coming. Others will need to be reminded, perhaps several times in the course of one conversation, who you are. They can all share with you wonderful stories and wisdom. So they will find it comfortable talking about themselves, it may help for you to share some basic information about yourself, such as where you grew up or what some of your hobbies and interests are.

Communicating with an Alzheimer's Resident

- Show that you are listening and trying to understand what is being said
- Maintain eye contact
- Encourage the person to continue to express thoughts even if he or she is having difficulty
- Be calm and supportive
- Use a gentle, relaxed tone of voice
- Use positive, friendly facial expressions
- Always approach the person from the front, identify yourself, and address him/her by name
- Speak slowly and clearly
- Break instructions into clear, simple steps
- Ask one question at a time/allow time to respond
- Use nonverbal communication such as pointing and touching
- Offer assistance as needed
- Don't talk about the person as if he/she wasn't there
- Have patience, flexibility, and understanding

Visiting with the Speech-Impaired

- If it is difficult to understand the older adult's speech, listen carefully, and ask the person to repeat things when you do not understand.
- Stay relaxed. Give time for responses.
- Repeat words or sentences after the person has spoken to make sure that you have understood correctly.
- Ask "yes" or "no" questions in an attempt to understand something he/she has said.
- Perhaps the older adult will be able to write down, gesture, or show you what he/she means.
- If the older adult has aphasia, he/she may have trouble talking and understanding what you are saying. Aphasia is a language problem that often occurs after a person has had a stroke.
- Use similar communication approaches as you would with a person who is hearing-impaired. But remember, the aphasic person can hear.
- If the person has trouble understanding you, use facial expressions, a different tone of voice, or gestures to communicate your meaning. Show the person what you mean.
- If the older adult uses little or no speech, do not stop talking to the person. Focus your visits on activities which do not rely on speech.

Visiting with the Hearing-Impaired

- Pay attention to the amount of noise in the area where you are visiting.
- If the older adult has a hearing aid, check to see whether they are wearing it and whether it is turned on.
- If the older adult has better hearing in one ear, position yourself to that side.
- Be sure that you have the older adult's attention before you begin to speak.
- Be sure that the older adult can see your face and mouth. Keep your hands away from your face.
- Position yourself two to six feet from the older adult at eye level.

- The hard-of-hearing older adult will also rely on your facial expression, tone of voice, and simple lip reading to understand what you are saying.
- Do not shout. Instead, lower the pitch of your voice and speak clearly. Speak slowly, but also speak naturally.
- Many letters are very difficult to hear correctly because they have little distinct sound to them or because we barely move our lips in saying them.
- Do not change the subject of the conversation too abruptly.
- Use gestures and written cues if this will increase the person's ability to participate in the visit.

Visiting with the Visually-Impaired

- Check to see whether the older adult has a pair of glasses they can wear and whether they are clean. If they do not have glasses, a simple magnifying glass or pair of magnifying glasses may be of help.
- Make sure the area where you will visit is well lit. The average 80 year old person needs three times more light than an average 25 year old person to see well enough to read.
- Pay attention to where the lights are coming from. Do not place yourself between the older adult and the source of light. When possible, eliminate sources of glare on shiny surfaces.
- Give the older adult's eyes more time to adjust to changes in light or distance. Moving from the outside to the inside, or turning on a bright light in a dimly lit room will require time for the older adult's eyes to adjust. Some activities involve a frequent change of focus from something close at hand to something farther away, such as a card game. Allow extra time for that adjustment.
- Always tell the older adult with severe vision impairment who you are when you are entering the room, and do not leave without saying that you are going.