

How does Alzheimer's disease impact children and teens?

Alzheimer's disease has a big impact on family life, especially if the person with the disease is being cared for in the home. It is important to take the time to talk with children and teens so they understand what is happening to the person with the disease.

The degree to which children and teens are affected by the disease depends on who has the disease (a parent, grandparent, relative or friend), how close they are to the person, and where that person lives (in the same home, nursing home, out-of-state, etc.). The impact of the disease is usually the greatest when a parent has the disease, and when the person with the disease lives in the same home.

What feelings may they be experiencing?

When someone in the family has Alzheimer's disease, oftentimes children and teens receive less attention, have their normal routine disrupted and are involved in the caregiving responsibilities. Children and teens may experience a wide range of emotions. They may feel:

- sad about changes in a loved one's personality and behavior
- confused about how people get the disease and why the person behaves differently
- afraid of the behaviors that the person with the disease exhibits
- worried that they or their parents may develop Alzheimer's disease
- angry and frustrated by the need to repeat activities or questions
- guilty for getting angry or being short-tempered with the person
- jealous and resentful because of the increased amount of time and attention that is given to the person with the disease
- embarrassed to have friends or other visitors to the house

What are common reactions to Alzheimer's disease?

Children and teens may exhibit their emotions in ways you may not easily recognize. It is important to watch for signs, such as changes in behavior, that will help you to understand what they are feeling.

If they are having difficulties understanding the disease, they may:

- withdraw from or lose patience with the person with the disease
- verbalize vague physical complaints such as a stomachache or headache
- perform poorly in school
- spend more time away from home
- stop inviting friends to the house

How can families help children and teens cope?

The most important way to help children and teens cope is to maintain open lines of communication. Comfort and support them by offering the opportunity to express their feelings and let them know that what they are feeling is normal. Begin the education process early and encourage them to ask questions. Always respond honestly and in terms that can be easily understood.

Questions you may be asked:

- What is Alzheimer's disease?
- Why does Grandpa call me by my dad's name?
- Will my mom get Alzheimer's too?
- Why is Grandma acting differently?
- What are some things we can do together?
- Why does Grandma keep asking the same question?
- How can I help Grandpa?

What activities can children and teens do with the person with Alzheimer's disease?

Activities can be a fun and simple way for children and teens to interact with the person who has Alzheimer's disease. Doing basic chores, daily routine tasks and other activities together may provide a positive experience for both young people and the person with the disease. People with Alzheimer's disease usually respond best to activities that are familiar and not too challenging. Make sure the tasks are comfortable and not too overwhelming for children and teens. For example, requesting children and teens to help with bathing and dressing may be an uncomfortable experience for them and the person with the disease.

Suggested activities:

- Walk around the yard or neighborhood
- Fold laundry
- Listen to music, dance, or sing
- Look at old photographs
- Read a favorite book or the newspaper
- Watch movies or musicals
- Keep a journal together

What help is available?

Despite the challenges, caring for someone who has Alzheimer's disease can be a positive experience when the entire family is educated about the disease and effective caregiving approaches.

One of the best places to turn for help is the Alzheimer's Association. Through its nationwide network of chapters, the Association offers a broad range of programs and services for people with the disease, their families, and caregivers. These services include support groups, telephone helplines, educational seminars, advocacy programs, and a variety of print and on-line resources on the disease, caregiving approaches, and current research.

Research into the causes, treatment, and prevention of Alzheimer's disease will create new options for treatment and care. The Alzheimer's Association, the largest private funder of Alzheimer research, is dedicated to supporting scientists who are making advances toward conquering this disease. For more information or to contact the chapter nearest you, call:

(800) 272-3900

Are there additional resources for children and teens?

The following resource materials are available from your local chapter or the national office of the Alzheimer's Association:

Brochures/Fact Sheets:

- *Just for Children - Helping You Understand Alzheimer's Disease*
- *Just for Teens - Helping You Understand Alzheimer's Disease*
- *An Overview of Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias*
- *Steps to Planning Activities: Structuring the Day at Home*
- *Steps to Enhancing Communication: Interacting with Persons with Alzheimer's Disease*

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