
Visiting the Doctor

If you suspect your loved one may have Alzheimer's disease (AD) or a related dementia, it is important to get a proper diagnosis from a licensed doctor. Be aware that many illnesses can cause confusion or dementia, and in some cases, those illnesses could be treated. For example, a urinary tract infection may cause confusion, but it can be treated. By having a correct diagnosis from a doctor, the doctor can decide on the best treatment.

While there is no cure for AD and some other dementias, a loved one diagnosed with AD can maximize the quality of his or her life by receiving an early diagnosis. The first step in getting an accurate diagnosis for an individual is visiting with that person's primary care physician.

Below are some quick tips to help you prepare your loved one for a visit to the doctor.

How to Prepare:

- **Keep a journal of physical or mental complaints, unusual behaviors, and questions.**

Record such things as: What symptoms have you noticed? When did the symptoms first appear? How have the symptoms changed over time?

- **Make a list of current medications.**

Include both prescription and over-the-counter drugs—even vitamins, supplements, herbs, and eye drops. Be sure to include a list of any drug allergies.

- **Schedule the appointment.**

You may want to talk with your loved one about making an appointment. Discuss this topic with your loved one, unless you think it will be upsetting. Ask your loved one if you can go along to the visit.

My Loved One Refuses to Go to the Doctor:

If you are having trouble getting your loved one to understand the need for a doctor visit or if your loved one refuses to go to the doctor, the following ideas may be helpful.

- **Seize the opportunity.**

Suggest a check-up if your loved one expresses any concern about “not remembering things lately.” You could explain that there are new medications that may help with memory, but they must be prescribed by a doctor. Ask permission to make an appointment.

- **Tell the doctor your concerns.**

Ask if the office could call your loved one to schedule an “overdue check-up.” Ask them not to mention any type of memory testing.

- **Ask for a personal favor.**

At times, loved ones will do something for others that they would not do for themselves. Ask them to see a doctor as a favor to you.

- **Schedule an appointment with the doctor for yourself.**

You could ask your loved one to come with you. Tell the doctor ahead of time to give you a check-up. However, inform the doctor that the *real* purpose of this visit is for your loved one. Ask the doctor to *personally* invite your loved one to have a check-up. The doctor should ask them this after your “physical.”

- **Schedule an appointment for the patient.**

Consider waiting to tell your loved one until a few minutes before it is time to get in the car. If they hesitate or refuse, then you could suggest that your loved one call to cancel the appointment. He or she may reconsider rather than “having to explain” the cancellation. Keep in mind, however, that some doctor offices may charge a fee for canceling the appointment less than 24-hours before the meeting.

- **Go somewhere fun or relaxing.**

Tell your loved one you are going to get ice cream, going out for a “special lunch,” or going to the park. When you are almost there, say, “We need to stop by and see Dr. Brown this morning.” While this may seem deceitful, the overall mission is to protect your loved one’s health, safety and well being.

- **Use other physical problems as an excuse.**

If your loved one has any other discomforts, you could explain that the doctor will give him or her something to help with that particular problem.

- **See if the doctor will do a home visit.**

It may be rare today, but there are still some visiting physicians. If not the doctor, a nurse practitioner or a visiting nurse may be able to do an assessment. This person can then report the results to the physician.

- **Do not get involved in a debate or argument.**

Never argue with a person who has AD. It is best to simply downplay or even ignore objections. For example, if your loved one says, “I will not go to the doctor,” you could reply with, “We will stop for ice cream on our way home.”

- **Call Protective Services if needed.**

If your loved one has become a danger to themselves, or if their well-being is in jeopardy, outside help might be required. Protective Services may be able to help convince your loved one to see a doctor. In MO you should call 800-392-0210 and in IL you should call 800-642-5429.

To Make the Visit Easier:

- **Look for ways to prevent catastrophic reactions.**

A *catastrophic reaction* is a when a confused individual reacts by becoming anxious, by crying, or by arguing. Your loved one may also wander away or become violent. Your loved one may do this because they are under a great deal of stress.

There are many ways to help prevent a catastrophic reaction. One way is to go to the doctor's office when it will not be crowded and to bring something to keep them occupied until the doctor calls you in. Distractions will help to keep them from being too stressed. Watch for situations in which your loved one may become upset. Look for ways to simplify what is going on, in order to make things less confusing. It is very important for you to stay calm as well, as it will help your loved one stay calm.

- **Take someone with you.**

Ask your spouse, a friend, or a family member to go with you and your loved one with AD. A third person can assist you in the car while you are driving. They can also take turns caring for your loved one in the doctor's office while you wait. The third person could also be the one to bring blank paper and take notes while talking with the doctor.

- **Plan your trip in advance.**

Know where you are going, where to park, how long it will take to get there, and if you need to use stairs or elevators. Allow enough time without rushing, but not so much time that you will be early and have to wait longer.

- **Call ahead and explain your concerns.**

Let the doctor and office staff know in advance that this is a person who is confused and will need special attention. Perhaps *they* can help by scheduling the visit for a time when there may not be a long wait and when the office may not be crowded.

- **Bring distractions in case of a wait.**

You could bring snacks or things that could keep your loved one busy (i.e., a deck of cards). You could also take a walk and check-in once in a while with the office staff. Never leave your loved one alone in the waiting room. He or she may become very upset.

What to Expect:

- **Physical and mental health history**

A doctor may review your loved one's past medical history and current medications that they are taking.

- **Physical examination**

A doctor may want to check for other physical concerns that could be causing the confusion.

- **Mental status tests**

The doctor may use several questionnaires and memory screening tests. These tests:

- Usually contain 20-30 questions each
- Require little time to complete
- May include standard questions about current events or situations
- May ask your loved one to draw and count
- May test your loved one's ability to do routine activities

- **Lab tests**

- A doctor may order blood or urine tests or brain scans.

Results:

If lab tests were ordered, the doctor may be able to discuss preliminary results of some of the tests, but complete results may take several days.

What Now?

If a problem has been identified, further tests or follow-up visits may be needed. The doctor may refer your loved one to a specialist, such as a neurologist or psychiatrist for a more in-depth diagnosis.

Treatment may be recommended by the doctor depending on the diagnosis. Medication may be prescribed, so you may need to consider who will manage the medicine if your loved one cannot take it correctly on his or her own.

Be Prepared To:

People often receive a diagnosis of AD with no discussion about the medical assistance that may be available to treat symptoms of the disease. So you should be prepared to:

- **Ask about current treatments for AD**

Some medicines may help an individual maintain higher levels of functioning for longer periods of time. If your loved one has not been prescribed any medicine for AD, ask the doctor about the possible benefits of Aricept, Exelon, Razadyne, or Namenda. There are also many different drug studies currently underway across the country, and your loved one may be able to participate. Contact the Alzheimer's Association for information about research for new medications.

- **Receive treatment for any other medical conditions**

Other health problems can worsen the symptoms of AD. These problems include: urinary tract infections or any kind of inflammation, thyroid disturbance, vitamin deficiencies, and viruses. Make sure to consult with the doctor regarding any condition which may worsen the symptoms of AD.

- **Discuss any mood or behavior changes**

Doctors can treat some of the symptoms of AD including: depression, irritability, agitation, or sleeplessness. Often the symptoms associated with AD respond to these medications. This will help your loved one to cope with the disease.

- **Ask about community resources**

Call the Alzheimer's Association's 24-hour Helpline. Resources and support services are available. We have lists on Neurologists, Psychiatrists, Geriatric Assessment Programs, and many more resources. Call our 24-hour Helpline anytime you need us at **(800) 272-3900**, or visit us online at **www.alzstl.org**.