

Just for You: Understanding Alzheimer's for Teenagers

Alzheimer's disease attacks the brain and causes people to have difficulty with memory, thinking, communicating and doing things they used to do. It is a complicated disease with many known risk factors, but we still do not know exact cause or how to fix it. Scientists are making progress and lots more is known now than we knew 20 years ago. Just because someone in your family has Alzheimer's disease, it does not necessarily mean that you or your parents will have it someday. It is a slow disease and people are able to do lots of things for a long time.

The disease starts in the part of the brain that has to do with short term memory and then affects the part of the brain that has to do with language. That means someone with the disease might:

- Repeat telling or asking you something.
- Forget your birthday.
- Come in a room and forget why they came in.
- Forget to pay their bills.
- Forget what you told them the last time you talked with them.
- Forget a word they were trying to say.
- Forget the point they were trying to make in the conversation.
- Mix up words and say one word when they meant to say another.

It then affects the other parts of the brain including the part that remembers where to go, the part where logic and decision making is and the part that lets us tune things out when we want. Some of what we might see includes:

- Getting lost.
- Saying something that doesn't make sense and getting mad at you when you try to explain the right answer.

- Getting nervous or upset if too much going on around them like at big family gatherings.
- Forgetting they have Alzheimer's or need help with things.
- Saying things they don't mean and not realizing it might hurt someone else's feelings.

Eventually, it affects the part of the brain that controls our ability to walk and even swallow. It is definitely a tough disease to have. But even with all the damage it does to the brain, individuals with Alzheimer's can still:

- have fun,
- love,
- feel your love and kindness.

DO...

- Listen to their stories, even if they say the same ones over and over.
- Say your name whenever you visit in case they forget names.
- Tell them you love them.
- Sing songs with them.
- Looking at family pictures with them and talking about what you remember about the picture.
- Take walks together.
- Tell them you are glad to see them.
- Give them plenty of time to answer questions. Slow down.
- Even if it seems they can't participate in the conversation, look at them and direct some comments their way.
- Be flexible — things change and we have to adapt to them.

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continued

DO... *continued*

- Forgive yourself and them when things don't go right.
- Learn all you can about Alzheimer's disease.
- Be proud of yourself and your family for what they are doing

DON'T

- Leave your things lying around. It might make them nervous if things are not where they think they should be.
- Get upset when they ask the same question over and over.... They can't remember your answer
- Argue with them... they won't understand your reasons
- Talk too fast ... this confuses them.
- Interrupt or talk to everybody else and leave them out of the conversation.
- Make your visit too long... they may get tired or nervous.

Taking care of someone who has Alzheimer's disease is hard. If your parent or grandparent is helping someone with Alzheimer's, they may be tired, frustrated, sad or get mad easy. They may have less time to spend with you. There may be times you are angry, sad, embarrassed and wish that your family member did not have Alzheimer's disease. It is important for you to talk with your family and other

adults and ask questions, learn about Alzheimer's disease and talk about your feelings. You can even talk to someone at the Alzheimer's Association. It might surprise you to know how many people in your school have family members with Alzheimer's disease. You might be able to teach other students important stuff about Alzheimer's just because you have been around it yourself. You might even be able to help other students who have someone they love with Alzheimer's.

There are some cool ways to learn about Alzheimer's disease at:

http://www.alz.org/living_with_alzheimers_just_for_kids_and_teens.asp

Some books about Alzheimer's you might like are:

Pop by Gordan Korman

Curveball: The Year I Lost my Grip
by Jordan Sonnenblic

Wherever You Go by Heather Davis

Remember This by S.T. Underdahl

The Brilliant Face of Gianna Z. by Kate Messner

My Grandmother Talks to Herself in the Mirror (But It's No Reflection on Me) by Karen Till Vitale

Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, My Mother and Me by Sarah Leavitt

Trudy by Jessica Lee Anderson

alzheimer's  association

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How to Contact the Alzheimer's Association – Heart of America Chapter 1.800.272.3900 • alz.org/kansascity

Main Office
3846 W. 75th Street
Prairie Village, KS 66208

Northeast Kansas Regional Office
3625 SW 29th St.
Suite 102
Topeka, KS 66614

Northwest Missouri Regional Office
10th and Faraon
St. Joseph, MO 64501

Southeast Kansas Regional Office
2601 Gabriel
Parsons, KS 67357

The Heart of America Chapter provides programs and services in 66 counties in Kansas and Missouri. These programs and services are made possible thanks to generous donations from individuals, corporations, and foundations. Contributions and donations allow the Chapter to provide supportive services, including care consultations, free of charge to individuals and families.