

Stages of Alzheimer's Disease

Experts have documented common patterns of symptom progression that occur in individuals with Alzheimer's disease. Based on these patterns, they developed several methods of “staging.”

Alzheimer's disease advances at widely different rates. Not everyone will experience every symptom, and symptoms may occur at different times in different individuals. People with Alzheimer's live an average of eight years after diagnosis, but may survive anywhere from three to 20 years.

Determining which stage an individual has reached helps families and health care professionals make better care decisions. Individuals with the disease and their families can prepare themselves for the progression of the disease. People with dementia can get involved with clinical studies through Alzheimer's Association TrialMatch®.

Staging the disease using the Global Deterioration Scale (GDS)

The Global Deterioration Scale is a system that outlines key symptoms and is characterized by seven stages ranging from unimpaired function to very severe cognitive decline.

NOTE: *GDS stages correspond to the widely used concepts of mild, moderate, moderately severe and severe Alzheimer's disease. Also noted are which stages fall within the more general divisions of early-stage, mid-stage and late-stage categories.*

Stage 1 – Preclinical Stage

Description: A newly defined stage reflecting current evidence that measurable biomarker changes in the brain may occur years before symptoms affecting memory, thinking or behavior can be detected by affected individuals or their physicians. While the guidelines identify these preclinical changes as an Alzheimer's stage, they do not establish diagnostic

criteria that doctors can use now. Rather, they propose additional research to establish which biomarkers may best confirm that Alzheimer's-related changes are underway and how to measure them.

Symptoms: No impairment (normal function). No experience with memory problems. An interview with a medical professional does not show any evidence of dementia symptoms.

Stage 2 – Early Stage

Description: Mild cognitive decline.

- Difficulty in social or occupational settings
- Friends or family may notice change

Symptoms: Very mild cognitive decline (may be normal age-related changes or earliest signs of Alzheimer's disease). The person may experience memory lapses — forgetting familiar words or the location of everyday objects — but no symptoms of dementia can be detected during a medical examination or by friends, family or co-workers.

Stage 3 – Early Stage

Description: Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) due to Alzheimer's disease. In this stage, mild changes in memory and thinking are noticeable and can be measured on mental status tests, but are not severe enough to disrupt day-to-day life.

Symptoms: Mild cognitive decline. Friends, family or co-workers begin to notice difficulties. During a detailed medical interview, doctors may be able to detect problems in memory or concentration. Common stage 3 difficulties include:

- Noticeable problems coming up with the right word or name
- Trouble remembering names when introduced to new people

Stages of Alzheimer's Disease

continued

- Experiencing noticeably greater difficulty performing tasks in social or work settings
- Forgetting material that was just read
- Losing or misplacing valued objects
- Increasing trouble with planning or organizing

Stage 4 – Early Stage

Description: Probable Alzheimer's dementia. The differentiation of dementia from MCI rests of the determination of whether there is significant interference in the ability to function at work or in usual daily activities. This is a clinical judgment based on information obtained from the patient and from a knowledgeable informant.

Symptoms: Moderate cognitive decline (mild or early-stage Alzheimer's disease). At this point, a careful medical interview should be able to detect clear-cut symptoms in several areas:

- Forgetfulness of recent events
- Impaired ability to perform challenging mental arithmetic — for example, counting backward from 100 by 7s
- Greater difficulty performing complex tasks, such as planning dinner for guests, paying bills or managing finances
- Forgetfulness about personal history
- Becoming moody or withdrawn, especially in socially or mentally challenging situations.

Stage 5 – Middle Stage

Description: Moderate cognitive decline.

- Difficulty performing simple tasks
- May need assistance with activities of daily living such as bathing or dressing

Symptoms: Moderately severe cognitive decline (moderate or mid-stage Alzheimer's disease). Gaps in memory and thinking are noticeable, and assistance with daily activities is needed. At this stage, the following changes may occur:

- Inability to recall home address, telephone number, or the names of high school or colleges attended
- Confusion about time or place
- Trouble with less challenging mental arithmetic, such as counting backward from 40 by subtracting 4s or from 20 by subtracting 2s
- Difficulty choosing proper clothing for the season or occasion
- Significant details about one's self and family may still be recalled
- Assistance eating or using the toilet may be required

Stage 6 – Middle Stage

Description: Severe cognitive decline.

Symptoms: Moderately severe or mid-stage Alzheimer's disease. Memory continues to worsen, personality changes may take place and extensive assistance is needed to complete activities of daily living. At this stage, the following changes may occur:

- Loss of awareness of recent experiences as well as surroundings
- No changes in ability to recall one's own name, but difficulty recalling personal history
- Ability to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar faces continues, but there may be difficulty remembering the name of a spouse or caregiver
- Assistance to dress properly and avoid mistakes such as putting pajamas over daytime clothes or shoes on the wrong feet
- Major changes in sleep patterns, including sleeping during the day and becoming restless at night
- Help with handling details of toileting (flushing the toilet, wiping or disposing of tissue properly)
- Increasingly frequent trouble controlling bladder or bowels

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Stages of Alzheimer's Disease

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- Major personality and behavioral changes, including suspiciousness and delusions (such as believing that a caregiver is an imposter), or compulsive, repetitive behaviors (such as hand-wringing or tissue-shredding)
- A tendency to wander or become lost

Stage 7 – Late Stage

Description: Severe Impairment.

- Supervision or complete assistance is required to complete all activities of daily living
- Communication is severely impaired

Symptoms: Very severe cognitive decline (severe or late-stage Alzheimer's disease). In the final stage of this disease, losses include the ability to respond to the environment, carry on a conversation and eventually, to control movement. Communication with words and phrases may be possible.

At this stage, assistance or supervision will be required to complete most daily personal care, including eating and using the toilet. Losses may include the ability to smile, sit without support and to hold one's head up. Reflexes come abnormal, muscles grow rigid and swallowing is impaired.

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

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