

Quick Tips: Get the Facts!

Understanding Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia

Earliest dementia

This stage roughly corresponds to the functional abilities of the young adult. Scientists are discovering that this earliest stage of the disease is the point in time when treatment will be most effective; it's also the stage of the disease which lasts the longest - as long as 20 years in some individuals. Families may notice most impairment in judgment and a mild forgetfulness. Watch for news reports on early diagnosis for this stage.

Major Features:

- Impairments in judgment
- Mild forgetfulness
- Longest stage of disease
- Most important - and effective - time to treat the disease
- Early diagnosis difficult but essential

Moderate dementia

Symptoms of this stage compare closest with a person functioning about 8 years old to adolescence. During this time, a person can still bath, dress, and groom him/herself, though sometimes with a unique flair (we think oddly), or inconsistently. We realize that judgment can be significantly enough impaired that individuals at this functional age shouldn't be left alone for extended periods of time, just as you would not leave a 9 or 10 year old child to live alone. Handling money is a particular concern, as is general safety.

Major Features:

- Approximates ages 8-16
- Significantly impaired judgment
- Beginning to see impairment in self-care skills
- Money handling concerns
- Personal safety concerns, watch driving

Moderately severe dementia

This stage seems to correspond most closely to the functional abilities of the individuals 5-7 years of age. Dressing, bathing, grooming and household tasks become more challenging. Individuals at this stage often will

wear inappropriate clothing, forget to bath, and neglect cooking (think about the child who will only eat three things.) Safety becomes a critical issue. Language skills are declining, though recognition is still present.

Major Features:

- Approximate age comparison: 5-7 years old
- Difficulties with daily living tasks: bathing, dressing, grooming, meal preparation
- Significant safety concerns: kitchen fires, doors left unlocked, etc.
- Reduced vocabulary

Severe dementia

At this stage of the disease, assistance is required with all tasks of daily living. Think of the 2-5 year old, and their abilities. Toileting may be independent, but reminders may be needed. Inappropriate eating: eating plants or other non-food items, eating all food with hands, etc. is more common. Later in this stage, toileting will become too challenging, and the individual may become incontinent of bowel and bladder.

Major Features:

- Assistance required for all daily living tasks
- Toileting skills becoming impaired
- Language skills further reduced
- Eating assistance may be required, using adaptive foods, tools

Very severe dementia

This stage corresponds to the functional ability of the infant to age 2 child. Recall that in infancy, we are all instinct and reflex. We tend to suck, not chew, grasp objects placed in our palms, and lie in a protective fetal position. In dementia, a person at this stage will lose all verbal communication skills, and will be dependent on others for total care. This end stage can last for months to years in an otherwise physically healthy adult. Families should be encouraged to make decisions about care for their loved one at this stage before getting to this point. Important decisions include the use of antibiotics in the case of illness, tube feeding, IV feeding or medication administering, and other difficult decisions.

Major Features:

- Total care required
- Inability to bear weight, incontinence create skin breakdown concerns
- End of life decision-making for families
- NOT ALL DEMENTIA PATIENTS END UP LIKE THIS! Many will die of other causes before reaching this very severe stage.