

The Progression of Alzheimer's Disease

Overview

Alzheimer's disease typically follows certain stages that will bring about significant changes in the person's life. The disease affects each individual differently, therefore the symptoms, the order in which they appear, and the duration of each stage vary from person to person. In most cases, the disease progresses slowly, and the symptoms of each stage may overlap, often making the move from one stage to another quite subtle. The duration of the disease is usually seven to ten years, but may be longer or shorter in some people.

Early Stage

The term "early stage" refers to people of any age who have mild thinking or cognitive problems as a result of Alzheimer's disease. This differs from the term "early onset" which refers to people who are diagnosed before the age of 65.

The early stage of Alzheimer's disease is also called "mild Alzheimer's disease". Individuals with Alzheimer's disease will likely retain many abilities and require minimal assistance at this stage. Frequently these people will still have insight into what is happening, recognizing that they have Alzheimer's disease. Understandably, they often feel overwhelmed and frightened about the future. Depression may also be a factor. Memory loss will make it difficult to learn new things, and follow long conversations. Often, getting lost, or not being able to follow directions, are early signs of Alzheimer's disease. Complex tasks, especially those that require many steps, will become very difficult. People with Alzheimer's disease may have mild problems with coordination, but generally there will be little physical evidence of the disease.



Middle Stage

The middle stage of Alzheimer's disease is also referred to as "moderate Alzheimer's disease". It is at this stage that individuals begin to require substantial support and assistance. Memory problems become more pronounced. People may remember their own name but not their address or phone number. People at this stage may not remember if they ate breakfast, bathed, or took their medication on any given day. Increasingly they will be confused as to time and place.

They will have growing problems understanding and expressing spoken and written language. People in the middle stage of Alzheimer's disease will not lose the ability to understand and express themselves nonverbally. It is essential that caregivers be aware of this and always monitor the nonverbal messages they are sending.



Mood shifts, including anxiety, fear, suspiciousness, sadness, anger, frustration, and apathy, are common during the middle stage. It is important to remember that these individuals have every right to feel what they feel and these feelings must always be taken seriously. These emotional changes can be caused by many different factors, such as how the person is reacting to their environment or how the person feels physically.

Physically, people in the middle stage need help with activities of daily living such as personal care and eating. They are not able to do routine tasks, such as getting dressed without assistance, because they no longer know how to do the steps in each task in order. They may sleep little at night and consequently be very tired during the day.

Late Stage

The late stage of the disease is sometimes referred to as “severe” or “advanced” Alzheimer’s disease. During this stage, a person with dementia needs 24 hour care. They are extremely disoriented, unable to speak coherently, and unable to move their bodies well. They lose the ability to walk without help, sit without support, the ability to smile, and the ability to hold up their heads. The brain appears to no longer be able to tell the body what to do.

The goal for late stage Alzheimer care should be to enhance and maintain the quality of life for the person, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

End of Life

Dying is a unique experience for each person, coming in its own time and its own way. However, the process often follows a somewhat predictable path. Blood pressure goes down and the person’s hands and feet may feel cool or cold. The person no longer accepts food or water as the different systems in the body shut down. Sleepiness increases and the person may experience pain or discomfort. When a person with Alzheimer’s disease is at the very end of their life, the focus should be on comfort and ease.



Source:

Alzheimer Society of Canada. (2008). The Progression Of Alzheimer’s Disease –Overview; Early Stage; Middle Stage; Late Stage; and End of Life information sheets.

If you have any questions please contact us at pec@alzheimerontario.org