

Stages of Symptom Progression in Alzheimer's Disease

fact sheet - 4

Symptoms of Alzheimer's disease generally progress in a recognizable pattern. These stages provide a framework for understanding the disease. It is important to remember they are not uniform in every person and the stages often overlap.

FIRST STAGE

2-4 Years leading up to and including diagnosis:

SYMPTOMS

- Recent Memory Loss
- Progressive forgetfulness; difficulty with routine chores
- Confusion about directions, decisions and money management
- Loss of spontaneity and initiative
- Repetitive actions and statements
- Mood/ personality and judgment changes
- Disorientation of time and place

EXAMPLES

- Forgets if bills are paid
- Loses things and/or forgets they are lost
- Arrives at wrong time or place
- Constantly checks calendar
- Forgets frequently called phone numbers

SECOND STAGE

2-10 Years after diagnosis (longest stage):

SYMPTOMS

- Increasing memory loss, confusion and shorter attention span
- Difficulty recognizing close friends and/or family
- Wandering
- Restlessness, especially in late afternoon and evening
- Occasional muscle twitching or jerking
- Difficulty organizing thoughts or logical thinking
- May see or hear things that are not there (Hallucinations)
- Needs full-time supervision

EXAMPLES

- Sleeps often - awakens frequently at night and may get up and wander ("Sundowner's")
- Perceptual/ motor problems, difficulty getting into a chair, setting the table
- Can't read signs, write name, add or subtract
- Suspicious - may accuse spouse of hiding things or infidelity (Paranoia)
- Loss of impulse control - may undress at inappropriate times or places
- Huge appetite for junk food - forgets when last meal was eaten; may lose interest in eating

THIRD STAGE

1-3 years

SYMPTOMS

- Unable to recognize family members or self in mirror
- Loss of weight even with proper diet; eventually becomes emaciated Capacity for self-care diminished
- Oral communication disappears, eventually becomes mute Tries to put everything in mouth; compulsion for touching Bowel and bladder incontinence
- May experience difficulty with swallowing, skin infections or seizures

EXAMPLES

- Looks in mirror and talks to own image
- Needs total care with bathing, dressing, eating and toileting May groan, scream or make grunting noises
- Sleeps more, becomes comatose; eventually dies

Source: Adapted by the Alzheimer's Association - Detroit Area Chapter. Credit to Lisa P. Gwyther, ACSW.

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Functional Assessment Staging

Stage 1	No difficulties, either subjectively or objectively.	6d	Urinary incontinence, occasional or more frequent.
Stage 2	Complains of forgetting location of objects; subjective word finding difficulties only.	6e	Fecal incontinence, occasional or more frequent.
Stage 3	Decreased job functioning evident to co-workers; difficulty in traveling to new locations.	Stage 7a	Ability to speak limited to about a half-dozen words in an average day.
Stage 4	Decreased ability to perform complex tasks (e.g., planning dinner for guests, handling finances, marketing).	7b	Intelligible vocabulary limited to a single word in an average day.
Stage 5	Requires assistance in choosing proper clothing for the season or occasion.	7c	Non ambulatory (Unable to walk without assistance).
Stage 6a	Difficulty putting clothing on properly without assistance.	7d	Unable to sit up independently.
6b	Unable to bathe properly; may develop fear of bathing. Usually requires assistance adjusting bath water temperature.	7e	Unable to smile.
6c	Inability to handle mechanics of toileting (i.e., forgets to flush, doesn't wipe properly).	7f	Unable to hold head up.

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