

LIVING WITH ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE



ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE is caused by destruction of nerve cells in the brain and typically appears in middle to late life. It affects both men and women of all ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds. The disease is a slowly progressing form of dementia, and the rate of progression differs for each person. Persons with Alzheimer's disease experience memory loss; language problems; and changes in decision-making ability, judgment, and personality.

Early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease include frequently repeating statements, misplacing items, difficulty finding names for familiar objects, getting lost on familiar routes, and changes in personality and emotional responses. In the middle stages, those with Alzheimer's disease forget basic information about the world, such as how to use common objects or how to get from point A to point B. In the later stages, skills like dressing, bathing, and reading become more difficult, and in the final stages the person returns to the functioning of an infant.

Occupational therapy practitioners help people with Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers to live life to its fullest by adapting the environment and focusing on what they *can* do to maximize engagement in activity (occupation), promote safety, and enhance quality of life. The following tips are from occupational therapy practitioners working with people with Alzheimer's disease.

If you would like to:

Try these activity tips:

An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:

Help the person do things independently.

In the middle stages, large, clearly written signs with step-by-step directions can help the person continue to do basic tasks like microwave a frozen meal or get dressed. The person is likely to need instructions repeated many times. Patience is key.

Observe the person at home and recommend changes to make it easier to do things more independently, such as create new routines, modify existing routines, or add adaptive equipment. The occupational therapist can also determine if the person responds better to certain types of cueing and other communication strategies, and work with you to use those strategies.

Keep the person safe.

Remove access to dangerous items, such as flammable liquids, stairwells, and medications; remove control knobs on potentially dangerous appliances such as the stove; and provide supervision when preparing meals.

Work with you to create a safety plan based on the needs of you, the person, and other caregivers. For example, the occupational therapist may determine how the person will safely obtain meals when no one is available to help in the kitchen.

If you would like to:

Try these activity tips:

An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:

Prevent a fall or other injury.

Remove or secure throw rugs and clutter, and keep furniture and other items in their familiar locations. Provide good lighting for walking pathways.

Complete a home safety evaluation. Recommendations might include adding safety equipment, such as bathroom grab bars or railings, or creating workspace so the person can do activities while seated.

Prevent wandering.

Sometimes people with Alzheimer's disease pay attention to simple signs such as "stop" on the door. You can also purchase a GPS locator for the person, and install deadbolts on doors and windows.

Modify activities the person once enjoyed to provide mental stimulation during times when wandering may be a concern.

Maintain an emotional connection.

Revive shared interests through photos and memories. Long-term memory is usually better than short-term memory. Encourage the person to share his or her life story with you.

Help create activities that you and the person can do together and teach you strategies to effectively manage difficult or unusual behavior (e.g., the person thinks you are someone else, is dressing inappropriately, cries easily, etc.).

Have some time to yourself.

Caregiving is a rewarding but stressful job. Schedule time for yourself even if it's only for short periods. Remember, you need to take care of yourself first, in order to care for someone else. Ask for assistance from those you know or call your local Area Agency on Aging.

Improve quality of life. Research has shown that occupational therapy can be more powerful than medication in helping people with Alzheimer's disease to function while reducing caregiver burden.

Need More Information?

Occupational therapy for Alzheimer's disease is a covered service under Medicare and many other payers and may be provided at home or in a skilled nursing facility. Ask your physician for a referral or contact an occupational therapist in private practice who specializes or has expertise in working with those who have Alzheimer's disease. You can find additional information through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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