

The progressive stages of Alzheimer's disease

Remember as you read these stages that some symptoms will overlap, some will vary in sequence and all are likely to vary in the rate at which they progress. Some may not occur at all. The onset is subtle. Often, the family is unsure anything is wrong. There will, however, generally be a continuous and progressive decline, rendering the person totally dependent on others for even the simplest of daily living activities.

Stage One:

Cognitive Changes

Begins with short-term memory loss:

- Unable to find the right words
- Forgets familiar names and telephone numbers
- Begins to write reminders but loses notes
- Shows preference for familiar things
 - wearing the same clothes
 - avoiding going out
- Judgment may be impaired early
 - dressing inappropriately for the weather

Personality Changes

- Less sparkle, spontaneity and ambition
- Appears passive or easily angered and restless
- Indifferent to the ceremonies and courtesies of social life
- Decreased interest in environment and present affairs
- Family may be hurt because person "doesn't seem to care"

Functional Changes

- Appears vague, uncertain and hesitant in initiating action
- Can function without direction only in familiar surroundings
- Forgetfulness is disruptive to former daily routines

Stage Two:

Cognitive Changes

Greater difficulty with:

- Memory
- Retention of new information
- Recall, calculations
- Decision-making and planning
- Following a story line
- Forgetful, may not
 - pay bills
 - take medication
 - turn off the stove
- Increased loss of learned behaviors
- Can talk about familiar topics

Personality Changes

- Increased self-absorption
- Socially withdrawn
- Lack of interest in others

Functional Changes

- Deterioration of ability to initiate and sequence purposeful activities
 - bathing
 - driving
- Sleep disturbance with restlessness at night
- Begins to neglect health and hygiene
- Needs directions to function in familiar surroundings
- Can respond to clear instruction

Stage Three:

Cognitive Changes

- Judgment is seriously impaired
- Fails to understand the consequences of eating spoiled food
- Fails to understand meaning of sensory stimuli
 - the danger of a smoke filled room
 - dressing inappropriately for the weather
- Becomes disoriented to time and place
- Learned behavior deteriorates
- Invents words and is often unable to express self in speech or writing
- Asks questions over and over
- Confusion is prevalent
- The understanding of other's words is lost

Personality Changes

- Marked deterioration of warmth
- Following conditions may or may not surface:
 - lethargy or hyperactivity
 - paranoia
 - aggression and hostility
 - delusions
 - sexual exposure

Functional Changes

- The "large picture" or global loss occurs
- May need to be told each step of a former routine act
 - brushing teeth
 - getting dressed
- May lose daily skills
 - buttoning a shirt
 - using a knife and fork
- May walk with a shuffling gait or become glued to floor from inability to motor-plan
- Often needs physical assistance with most activities of daily living

- dressing
- bathing
- meal preparation
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- Needs protection and supervision

Stage Four:

Cognitive Changes

- Unable to:
 - speak or understand language
 - write or read
 - recognize anyone including self in the mirror
- Repeats words or actions

Personality Changes

- Total deterioration with following possible symptoms:
 - Confusion
 - Delusions
 - Hallucinations
 - Aggression
 - Violent episodes
 - Complete withdrawal or apathy

Functional Changes

- Generally progresses to include:
 - Inability to feed self, chew or swallow
 - Morbid hunger, eating everything in sight while still losing weight
 - Putting everything in mouth
 - Compulsively touches everything
 - Seizures
 - Constant chewing movements and smacking lips
 - Difficulty walking but eventually becomes bedridden
 - Incontinence of bowel and bladder
 - Responsiveness to tactile stimuli only
 - Eventually lack of response to pain stimuli and loss of consciousness
 - Inability to survive without total care

Duration of Disease:

The disease may last from 2 to 20 years.