



In brief:

From early warnings to end stage, dementia, Alzheimer's exact heavy toll

Welcome to Illuminate, our next-gen, interactive educational platform designed to inform professionals and key decision makers about the most important issues facing the industry today by shedding light on an ever-growing body of knowledge.

Alzheimer's disease may someday be remembered as one of the worst curable diseases the human race has every faced, and research continues at a brisk pace.

A neurological brain disorder, Alzheimer's exacts a heavy toll on our society, creating more than 5 million new cases each year. A third of every person over the age of 65 will die from it or another cognitive disorder and two-thirds of all nursing home residents suffer from at least one kind of cognitive impairment. According to the Alzheimer's Association, a person with Alzheimer's lives four to eight years after diagnosis, but can live as long as 20 years, depending on other factors.

Alzheimer's is often confused with a larger cluster of various symptoms of memory and cognitive decline called dementia, yet many Alzheimer's patients never experience a single symptom of dementia. Alzheimer's is by far the most common cause of any form of dementia – up to 80% of all cases.

To the lay person, the early warning signs of onset Alzheimer's disease and dementia seem similar, yet like so many of the conditions of the immensely complex human brain, so unique.

In limited cases, public insurance like Medicare and Medicaid may cover a small portion.

A recent study in the Journal of Palliative Medicine highlighted some of the many concerns with palliative care. While most nursing home residents and families chose to limit aggressive life-prolonging therapies, researchers point to several studies that have documented costly hospitalizations and "burdensome treatments" in the final days of life. Advanced directives around resuscitation are common, while most continue to not address issues like artificial nutrition and hydration, hospitalization, antibiotics and comfort measures, they pointed out.

According to the Alzheimer's Association and other groups, many shared dementia and Alzheimer's symptoms include:

- Problems with short-term memory.
- Challenges with visual cues like getting lost.
- Difficulty planning or solving.
- Difficulty doing familiar tasks like paying bills or planning and preparing meals.
- Confusion about time or place.
- Problems speaking or writing.
- Poor judgment or decision-making.
- Withdrawal and mood changes.

Diagnosing dementia, Alzheimer's

In addition to exploring a patient's full medical history, the following describes a series of tests designed to pinpoint specific kinds of dementia, including Alzheimer's: Cognitive and neuropsychological tests; neurological evaluation; brain scans; laboratory blood and spinal fluid tests; and psychiatric evaluation.

Stages

As the Fisher Center for Alzheimer's Research Foundation points out, the following clinical stages of Alzheimer's disease (known also as the Global Deterioration Scale), are used worldwide to identify the area each Alzheimer's patient has progressed to.

Pre-dementia stages. They begin with normal, progress to normal aged forgetfulness and then mild cognitive impairment. Duration: about seven years.

Dementia stages. These include the progression from mild to moderate forms of the disease and are marked by conditions like difficulty writing and inability recalling recent events, diminished ability to perform complex tasks and perform routine mental tasks and in the final stage, requiring assistance. Duration: ROUGHLY four years.

Severe Alzheimer's disease. In the end stage of Alzheimer's, patient require assistance with essentially every activity of daily living for survival.

Treatments

One of the many undeniable facts about treating dementia and Alzheimer's is this: there is no cure and no treatment that slows or stops their progression. As with so many other conditions, however, treating Alzheimer's and dementia is more successful the earlier the diagnosis, as Biogen points out.

In all, there is a veritable arsenal of weapons clinicians have at their disposal, according to the Alzheimer's Association. These include memory and behavior medications, sleep change treatments and alternative treatments.

Compiled from the following sources: The Fisher Center for Alzheimer's Research Foundation; Alzheimer's Association; Auguste Deter Foundation; Health Affairs; AARP; British National Health Service; Medical News Today; Mayo Clinic; Biogen; Health Imaging; and Drug Target Review.

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