

LEARNING MADE EASY

100 Questions

& Answers

About Alzheimer's & Dementia

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

Simon Poole, MD

AGS Geriatrics
Healthcare
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Leading Change. Improving Care for Older Adults.

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FOUNDATION

100 Questions & Answers About Alzheimer's & Dementia

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Contents at a Glance

Introduction.....	1
Part 1: Understanding Alzheimer’s and Dementia	3
CHAPTER 1: Introducing Alzheimer’s and Dementia	5
CHAPTER 2: Diagnosing Alzheimer’s and Dementia	15
CHAPTER 3: Identifying the Symptoms and the Effects on the Brain	21
CHAPTER 4: Reducing the Risk of Alzheimer’s and Dementia	27
Part 2: Coping with Alzheimer’s and Dementia	35
CHAPTER 5: Living with Alzheimer’s or Dementia	37
CHAPTER 6: Considering Treatment Options	51
CHAPTER 7: Staying Informed and Participating in Research	57
Part 3: Supporting Someone with Alzheimer’s or Dementia	65
CHAPTER 8: Helping Someone Live with Alzheimer’s or Dementia	67
CHAPTER 9: Ethical and Advocacy Considerations.....	81
CHAPTER 10: Medical Complications and End-of-Life Care	87
CHAPTER 11: Finding the Support You Need as a Caregiver	95
Part 4: Social, Cultural, and Spiritual Considerations.....	101
CHAPTER 12: Social and Cultural Implications.....	103
CHAPTER 13: Spiritual Considerations	107
CHAPTER 14: Challenges and Awareness	111
Index	117

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
About This Book	1
Foolish Assumptions.....	2
Icon Used in This Book	2
Where to Go from Here.....	2
 PART 1: UNDERSTANDING ALZHEIMER'S AND DEMENTIA.....	 3
CHAPTER 1: Introducing Alzheimer's and Dementia	5
What Is Alzheimer's Disease?.....	6
What Is Dementia?	6
What Is the Difference between Alzheimer's Disease and Other Types of Dementia?	7
What Is the Difference between Dementia and Normal Aging?.....	9
What Causes Alzheimer's Disease?	9
Is Alzheimer's Disease Hereditary?	10
What Are the Risk Factors for Alzheimer's Disease?.....	11
What Are the Risk Factors for Dementia?	12
What Are the Common Myths about Alzheimer's Disease?.....	13
What Are the Common Myths about Dementia?	14
 CHAPTER 2: Diagnosing Alzheimer's and Dementia.....	 15
How Is Alzheimer's Disease Diagnosed?	16
How Is Dementia Diagnosed?.....	16
Is There an Advantage in Making an Early Diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	17
What Are the Stages of Alzheimer's Disease?	18

	How Does Alzheimer's Disease Progress over Time?.....	19
	How Does Dementia Progress over Time?	19
CHAPTER 3:	Identifying the Symptoms and the Effects on the Brain.....	21
	What Are the Early Signs of Alzheimer's Disease?.....	22
	What Are the Symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease?.....	22
	What Are the Symptoms of Dementia?	23
	How Does Alzheimer's Disease Affect the Brain?	24
	How Does Dementia Affect the Brain?	25
CHAPTER 4:	Reducing the Risk of Alzheimer's and Dementia	27
	Can Alzheimer's Disease Be Prevented?	28
	Can Dementia Be Prevented?.....	29
	What Role Does the Mediterranean Diet Play in Reducing the Risk of Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia?.....	30
	How Does the MIND Diet Differ from the Mediterranean Diet in Protecting against Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia?.....	31
	What Lifestyle Changes Can Help Reduce the Risk of Developing Alzheimer's Disease?.....	32
	What Lifestyle Changes Can Help Reduce the Risk of Developing Dementia?	33
	Does Aluminum in Cookware or Antiperspirants Cause Alzheimer's Disease?	33
PART 2:	COPING WITH ALZHEIMER'S AND DEMENTIA	35
CHAPTER 5:	Living with Alzheimer's or Dementia	37
	What Are the Challenges of Living with Alzheimer's Disease?.....	38
	What Are the Challenges of Living with Dementia?	39

How Can I Cope with the Emotional Impact of Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	40
How Can I Manage the Symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	40
What Are the Common Behavioral Changes in Alzheimer's Disease?	41
What Are the Common Behavioral Changes in Dementia?	42
If I Have Early-Stage Alzheimer's Disease, How Can I Remain Socially and Mentally Active?	43
Can Certain Foods Help Prevent or Delay Cognitive Decline in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	44
What Role Does Music Therapy Play in Improving Quality of Life for People with Dementia?	45
What Are the Benefits of Joining a Support Group?	46
How Can I Find a Support Group for People with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	46
How Can I Plan for the Future with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	47
What Are the Legal and Financial Considerations If I Have Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	48
What Financial Planning Tools Are Available for Families Dealing with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	49

CHAPTER 6: Considering Treatment Options..... 51

What Treatments Are Available for Alzheimer's Disease?	52
What Treatments Are Available for Dementia?	53
Are There Any Natural or Lifestyle-Based Treatments That Support Brain Health in Dementia?	54
What Complementary Therapies Are Commonly Used by People with Alzheimer's Disease?	55

CHAPTER 7:	Staying Informed and Participating in Research	57
	How Can I Stay Informed about Alzheimer's Disease?.....	58
	How Can I Stay Informed about Dementia?	58
	How Can I Find Trustworthy Sources of Information Online about Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?.....	59
	What Are the Latest Research Developments in Alzheimer's Disease?	60
	What Are the Latest Research Developments in Dementia?.....	61
	How Can I Participate in Alzheimer's Disease Research?	61
	How Can I Participate in Dementia Research?	62
	What Questions Should I Ask Before Enrolling in a Clinical Trial for Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	62
	How Can I Educate Others about Alzheimer's Disease?.....	63
	How Can I Educate Others about Dementia?	64

PART 3: SUPPORTING SOMEONE WITH ALZHEIMER'S OR DEMENTIA..... 65

CHAPTER 8:	Helping Someone Live with Alzheimer's or Dementia	67
	How Can I Support Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?.....	68
	How Can I Help My Loved One Maintain Quality of Life with Alzheimer's Disease?	69
	How Can I Help My Loved One Maintain Quality of Life with Dementia?	69
	What Are the Challenges of Caring for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	70
	How Can Knowing a Person's History Help with Dementia Care?	71

How Can I Manage the Daily Care Needs of Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	72
What Are the Communication Challenges in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	73
How Can I Improve Communication with Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	74
What Are the Nutritional Needs of Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	75
How Can Hydration Be Maintained for Someone with Dementia Who Forgets to Drink Water?	76
What Are the Mealtime and Eating Challenges for Someone with Mid- to Late-Stage Alzheimer's Disease?	76
What Are the Safety Concerns for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	77
How Can I Create a Safe Environment for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	78
CHAPTER 9: Ethical and Advocacy Considerations	81
What Are the Ethical Considerations in Alzheimer's Disease Care?	82
What Are the Ethical Considerations in Dementia Care?	83
How Can I Advocate for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease?.....	84
How Can I Advocate for Someone with Dementia?	85
CHAPTER 10: Medical Complications and End-of-Life Care	87
What Are the Common Medical Complications in Alzheimer's Disease?	88
What Are the Common Medical Complications in Dementia?.....	88

How Can I Manage Medical Complications in Alzheimer's Disease?	89
How Can I Manage Medical Complications in Dementia?.....	90
What Should I Know about Pain Management in the Late Stages of Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?	91
What Are the End-of-Life Considerations for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease?	92
What Are the End-of-Life Considerations for Someone with Dementia?	92
How Can I Provide Comfort and Care at the End of Life for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease?.....	93
How Can I Provide Comfort and Care at the End of Life for Someone with Dementia?	94
CHAPTER 11: Finding the Support You Need as a Caregiver	95
What Support Resources Are Available for Caregivers?.....	96
Are There Online Support Groups for Caregivers?.....	96
How Can I Build Resilience as a Caregiver?.....	97
How Can I Manage Stress as a Caregiver?	98
Can Mindfulness or Meditation Help Reduce Caregiver Stress?	98
PART 4: SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND SPIRITUAL CONSIDERATIONS	101
CHAPTER 12: Social and Cultural Implications	103
What Are the Social Implications of Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?.....	103
How Can I Navigate Social Interactions with Someone Who Has Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?.....	104
How Do Different Cultures View Dementia, and How Does That Affect Caregiving Approaches?	105

What Are the Cultural Considerations in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Care?.....	105
How Can I Address Cultural Differences in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Care?.....	106
CHAPTER 13: Spiritual Considerations	107
What Are the Spiritual Considerations in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Care?.....	108
How Can I Address Spiritual Needs in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Care?.....	109
CHAPTER 14: Challenges and Awareness	111
What Barriers Prevent Early Diagnosis of Dementia in Minority or Rural Populations?	112
What Are the Common Challenges in Alzheimer's Disease Research?.....	112
What Are the Common Challenges in Dementia Research?	113
What Are the Ethical Dilemmas in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Research?.....	114
How Can I Help Raise Awareness about Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?.....	115
What Are Possible Future Developments in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Treatments?	116
INDEX	117

Introduction

One of the most common misconceptions about Alzheimer's and dementia is that there is little that can be done to help someone with the condition. But the truth is, access to support, education about the illness, and medical treatment can make a significant difference in quality of life. This book is a great place to start on your journey toward more information. I wrote it to answer common questions about Alzheimer's and dementia — what they are, what causes them, how they affect the lives of people who have them, and the treatment options available.

About This Book

This book is a reference, which means you don't need to read the chapters in order from beginning to end, and you don't have to remember anything — there isn't a test at the end of it.

Within this book, you may note that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and want to visit one of these web pages, simply key in the web address exactly as it's noted in the text, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an e-book, you've got it easy — just click the web address to be taken directly to the web page.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, I made just a couple of assumptions about you, the reader:

- » You have Alzheimer's or dementia, or know someone who has it.
- » You have questions, and you want answers.

If those basic assumptions apply to you, you've come to the right place.

Icon Used in This Book

This book uses the following icon in the margins:



When you see the Tip icon, you'll find information that will make your life a little easier, at least when it comes to Alzheimer's or dementia.

Where to Go from Here

If you aren't sure where to begin, head to the Table of Contents and skim through the questions until you find one that catches your eye. Or, if you have a specific topic in mind, search for it in the Index. Want to know absolutely everything? Turn the page and start with Part 1.

1

Understanding Alzheimer's and Dementia

IN THIS PART . . .

This part explains what Alzheimer's and dementia are and how they're related. It defines the various forms of dementia (*hint*: Alzheimer's is one of them), discusses how they're diagnosed, outlines their symptoms, and explains their effects on the brain. Finally, it explains what you can do to reduce your risk of Alzheimer's and dementia. If you or a loved one has recently received a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or dementia, this part is for you.

DID YOU KNOW?

The World Health Organization estimates that more than 55 million people around the world are living with dementia. This number is projected to nearly triple to 139 million by 2050 as populations age.

Chapter **1** Introducing Alzheimer's and Dementia

Alzheimer's disease and dementia both affect the brain, but they're not the same. In this chapter, I define both conditions, explain the differences between them (and normal aging), look at what causes Alzheimer's disease and whether it's hereditary, explore the risk factors of both conditions, and debunk the myths surrounding both.

What Is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive brain disorder that gradually damages a person's memory, their thinking skills, and, over time, their ability to perform everyday tasks. It is the most common cause of dementia (see the next section). Alzheimer's disease is marked by specific abnormal changes in the brain that can be identified with particular types of scans.

Alzheimer's disease often starts in the areas of the brain responsible for memory and then spreads to other regions. As the disease progresses, the brain gradually shrinks and symptoms worsen. People may experience more memory loss, confusion, difficulty speaking or understanding language, and noticeable shifts in mood or behavior.

Although there is currently no cure for Alzheimer's disease, various treatments and forms of support can help ease symptoms and improve quality of life for both individuals and their caregivers.

What Is Dementia?

Dementia is a general term used to describe a group of symptoms that affect memory, thinking, and daily functioning. There are several different types of dementia, but they all occur

when the brain is damaged by disease or injury that interferes with its ability to process information. People with dementia may have trouble remembering things, following conversations, making decisions, or managing everyday tasks. Dementia can also lead to changes in mood, behavior, and personality. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia, but there are several other types of dementia as well. These types differ in their underlying causes, how they progress, and the specific symptoms they may cause (see the next section).

What Is the Difference between Alzheimer's Disease and Other Types of Dementia?

Alzheimer's disease has specific characteristics in its presentation, symptoms, and progression. Changes in the brain include the buildup of two types of proteins:

- » **Amyloid:** Amyloid is a protein that can build up between nerve cells. When it builds up, it forms sticky clumps called *amyloid plaques*.
- » **Tau:** Tau is a protein that can become twisted inside cells, where they're known as *tau tangles*.

These changes disrupt how brain cells communicate, eventually causing the cells to become damaged and die.

Other types of dementia include the following:

- » **Vascular dementia:** Vascular dementia is caused by reduced blood flow to the brain, often after stroke. It leads to problems with thinking and movement.
- » **Lewy body dementia:** Lewy body dementia is linked to abnormal protein deposits in the brain. These protein deposits can cause visual hallucinations, sleep issues, and movement changes.
- » **Frontotemporal dementia:** Frontotemporal dementia affects the brain's front and sides. It often results in early personality and language changes.
- » **Mixed dementia:** In mixed dementia, more than one type of dementia occurs together.

In addition, less common forms of dementia are related to Parkinson's disease (often involving movement problems and gradual cognitive decline), Huntington's disease (a genetic disorder causing involuntary movements, mood changes, and dementia), and prion diseases (rapidly progressive conditions caused by abnormal infectious proteins), each with specific underlying causes and symptom patterns.

What Is the Difference between Dementia and Normal Aging?

Normal aging may bring some mild changes in *cognition* (the way a person is able to think and interpret information), like occasional forgetfulness or slower processing speed, but these changes typically don't significantly interfere with daily life.

In contrast, dementia, whether in the form of Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia, involves a significant decline in cognitive abilities, such as memory, thinking, and reasoning. The decline is severe enough to impair a person's everyday functioning and independence, and the symptoms progressively worsen over time. There are usually specific changes in the brain beyond the *atrophy* (expected shrinkage in brain size) that are seen in normal aging.

What Causes Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease is caused by a combination of changes in the brain over time, most notably the abnormal buildup of two specific proteins: amyloid and tau (see "What Is the Difference between Alzheimer's Disease and Other Types of Dementia?" earlier in this chapter). The results

include an accumulation of disordered nerve cells and fibers called *neurofibrinary tangles*, which interfere with the normal communication and function of brain cells, eventually leading to their death.

The earliest damage often begins in the *hippocampus*, a part of the brain involved in forming new memories. Over time, damage spreads to other areas, affecting thinking, behavior, and physical function. Researchers do not yet understand the cause of the changes, but it's likely a complex interaction between genetic predisposition, aging, and lifestyle or environmental factors.

Is Alzheimer's Disease Hereditary?

Most cases of Alzheimer's disease are not directly inherited, but genetics can play a role in influencing a person's risk. Having a close family member — such as a parent or sibling — with Alzheimer's disease does increase your chances slightly, though it does *not* mean you will definitely develop the disease. This increased risk likely results from a combination of shared genes, lifestyle, and environmental factors.

Particular genes have been identified as influencing risk. The most well-known of these genes is the APOE e4 gene variant, which seems to be more common in people who develop *late-onset Alzheimer's disease* (where the disease

occurs later in life, generally considered over 65 years of age). However, carrying this gene does not guarantee Alzheimer's will develop; it only increases the likelihood.

In less than 1 percent of all cases, Alzheimer's disease is inherited in a clear, familial pattern due to mutations in specific genes such as APP, PSEN1, or PSEN2, often leading to *early-onset Alzheimer's* (in which the disease begins between the ages of 30 and 64).



TIP

Understanding your family history can help inform discussions with a doctor, but it's important to remember that having a genetic risk is not the same as having the disease, and healthy lifestyle choices may still help reduce your overall risk.

What Are the Risk Factors for Alzheimer's Disease?

Age is the most significant risk factor for Alzheimer's disease, with most cases diagnosed in people over the age of 65. However, it's not just aging alone — a range of other risk factors can contribute.

These risk factors include genetic factors; a family history of Alzheimer's disease; and chronic conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity, especially if they're poorly controlled in midlife. Smoking, physical inactivity, poor diet, and lack of mental stimulation

can also increase risk. Emerging research also links untreated hearing loss, social isolation, and long-term stress or depression to a higher chance of developing the disease. Importantly, addressing some of these risk factors may help delay or prevent the onset of symptoms.

What Are the Risk Factors for Dementia?

Dementia is a general term for a range of conditions caused by damage to the brain that interferes with memory, thinking, and daily activities. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form, but there are several others, each with different underlying causes. Age and genetics play a role, but many forms of dementia are also linked to lifestyle and health-related factors that affect the brain over time.

For example, vascular dementia is caused by reduced blood flow to the brain, often due to stroke, narrowed arteries, or small vessel disease — frequently as part of more widespread cardiovascular disease. Conditions that harm the heart and blood vessels — such as high blood pressure, diabetes, smoking, high cholesterol, and an unhealthy diet — can increase the risk. These factors may also lead to chronic inflammation and *oxidative stress* (a process in which unstable molecules called *free radicals* damage cells, including those in the brain). Oxidative stress is thought to contribute to the

development and progression of several types of dementia, including vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease.



TIP

Many of these risk factors are modifiable, meaning steps that improve heart and brain health — such as stopping smoking, eating a healthy diet, and managing blood pressure — can help reduce the risk of oxidative stress, chronic inflammation, cardiovascular disease, and dementia.

What Are the Common Myths about Alzheimer's Disease?

Several myths persist about Alzheimer's disease. One of the most common is the belief that the features of Alzheimer's disease are just a normal part of aging. In reality, although some forgetfulness can occur with age, Alzheimer's disease is a specific disease that causes serious and progressive changes in the brain, leading to memory loss and other cognitive impairments that are not part of normal aging.

Another myth is that only older people can develop Alzheimer's disease. Although age is the biggest risk factor, early-onset Alzheimer's disease can affect people in their 30s, 40s, or 50s.

There is also a widespread perception that nothing can be done after diagnosis, when in fact treatments and lifestyle strategies can help manage symptoms and improve quality of life.

What Are the Common Myths about Dementia?

A common myth about dementia is that all dementia is the same. Dementia is often misunderstood as a single disease, but it's actually an umbrella term for a group of conditions — including Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, and frontotemporal dementia — that affect memory, thinking, and behavior. The different presentations, characteristics, challenges, and accompanying physical features of different types of dementia mean that it's important to appreciate those distinctions and how they impact care and therapy needs.

DID YOU KNOW?

Alzheimer's disease is more common than you may think. It begins to develop in the brain a decade or even two decades or more before the first noticeable symptoms appear.

Chapter 2

Diagnosing Alzheimer's and Dementia

Globally, it's estimated that around 75 percent of all dementia cases go undiagnosed. In this chapter, I outline how Alzheimer's disease and dementia are diagnosed, the stages of Alzheimer's disease, and how both conditions progress. Receiving a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or dementia is difficult, but knowing what to expect can help.

How Is Alzheimer's Disease Diagnosed?

Alzheimer's disease is usually diagnosed when the person themselves or their family and friends seek medical advice because of changes to their *cognition* (the way a person is able to think and interpret information), memory, daily functioning, or behavior. A neurologist or memory clinic specialist usually confirms the diagnosis through a combination of medical history, physical examination, memory and thinking tests, and sometimes brain scans.

They may use tools like the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) or other cognitive assessments to check how well a person can recall information, follow instructions, or solve problems. Brain scans such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or computed tomography (CT) can help rule out other causes and show signs of brain changes typical of Alzheimer's disease, like shrinkage in certain areas. In some cases, blood tests or spinal fluid analysis may be used to look for Alzheimer's-related proteins.

How Is Dementia Diagnosed?

Dementia is a broad term covering a number of different types of conditions affecting cognition; it's diagnosed by identifying a clear decline in information processing abilities that interferes with daily life, and by ruling out other possible causes. Diagnosis usually involves a detailed

conversation with the person and their family, cognitive testing, a physical examination, and sometimes lab tests or brain imaging. The initial diagnosis is often made by a primary care doctor or general practitioner.

Specialists will try to determine which type of dementia it may be — such as Alzheimer’s disease (which constitutes 60 percent to 70 percent of dementia cases worldwide), vascular dementia, or Lewy body dementia — based on the pattern of symptoms and test results. The differences can be discerned by the way the condition presents and progresses, as well as by appearances in results of tests and scans. Making a firm diagnosis is important because treatment may differ depending on the cause.



TIP

Some medical conditions — such as depression, thyroid disorders, vitamin B12 deficiency, infections, or medication side effects — can cause symptoms that may look like dementia, including memory loss and confusion. These conditions are often treatable, so it’s important to rule them out before confirming a dementia diagnosis.

Is There an Advantage in Making an Early Diagnosis of Alzheimer’s Disease or Dementia?

Some people are reluctant to seek medical advice about symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease or dementia, perhaps due to fear or shame. But

anxiety is often reduced after a person has come to terms with the initial diagnosis and realizes that, despite the lack of a cure, there *are* options for therapy and support.

An early diagnosis allows individuals and families to plan for the future, access support services, and start treatments or make lifestyle changes that may help manage symptoms or slow progression. Early diagnosis can also rule out other treatable causes of symptoms that may mimic those of dementia. Importantly, it enables people to make informed decisions about their care and legal matters while they're still able — which can help the person to live with dignity and autonomy longer than they may have otherwise.

What Are the Stages of Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease is usually described in three main stages: early (mild), middle (moderate), and late (severe). The transition between these stages is often gradual, and there are no clearly defined criteria for each stage, but the categorization can be helpful to understand the condition's progression and to make decisions about treatment and care.

In the early stage, a person may experience mild memory loss, trouble finding words, or difficulty staying organized, but they can still manage most daily activities. In the middle stage,

symptoms such as confusion, repeating questions, or getting lost become more noticeable, and greater support is often needed. In the late stage, memory and thinking decline severely, and the person may lose the ability to communicate, recognize loved ones, or carry out basic tasks like eating or walking; they usually require constant care, often in a specialized long-term-care facility or nursing home.

How Does Alzheimer's Disease Progress over Time?

Alzheimer's disease is *progressive*, meaning symptoms gradually worsen over time. Changes in the brain usually begin long before symptoms appear, and as the disease moves through its stages, damage spreads to more areas of the brain. Over time, what starts as mild forgetfulness develops into significant problems with memory, judgment, communication, and physical functioning. The rate of progression varies from person to person, but Alzheimer's typically unfolds over several years, eventually leading to complete dependence on others for care.

How Does Dementia Progress over Time?

Dementia progresses differently for each person and depends on the type of dementia, the underlying cause, and the person's overall health. For

example, Alzheimer's disease tends to follow a gradual, steady decline over several years, while Lewy body dementia may involve more ups and downs, with sudden changes in cognition and fluctuations, especially in the early stages, from lucidity to periods of hallucinations and confusion.

In vascular dementia, the progression can be more steplike, worsening after a stroke or other event. In some cases, symptoms may be slowed or stabilized with treatment of the underlying blood vessel problems.



TIP

Although most types of dementia are progressive and not curable, early diagnosis and supportive care can help manage symptoms and improve quality of life.

DID YOU KNOW?

The destructive effect of Alzheimer's disease results in brain shrinkage, with a loss of up to 30 percent of brain mass by the end stages.

Chapter 3

Identifying the Symptoms and the Effects on the Brain

Alzheimer's disease is a type of dementia, so the symptoms of the two conditions overlap. But Alzheimer's isn't the only type of dementia — and other types of different symptoms and effects on the brain. In this chapter, I explain the signs and symptoms to expect when you or a loved one has been diagnosed with one of these conditions. (Turn to Chapter 2 for more on getting a diagnosis.)

What Are the Early Signs of Alzheimer's Disease?

The early signs of Alzheimer's disease often involve subtle memory difficulties, especially forgetting recent conversations, appointments, or events. This may be more noticeable to a close relative of the person than it is to the individual themselves. People with Alzheimer's may also struggle to find the right words, lose track of dates or time, or become disoriented in familiar places. These changes usually develop gradually and can be mistaken for normal aging at first, but they tend to worsen steadily and begin to interfere with daily life.



TIP

Early detection is important because it allows individuals and families to plan for the future, access support services, and explore treatment options that may help slow progression of the disease. Cognitive changes may also affect judgment and decision-making, so recognizing these early signs can improve safety and quality of life, even though seeking a diagnosis may seem daunting.

What Are the Symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease?

As Alzheimer's disease progresses, symptoms become more noticeable and affect multiple aspects of cognition and behavior. Persistent memory loss is common, along with difficulties

in language, communication, and problem-solving. People may find it hard to perform everyday tasks such as cooking, managing money, driving safely, or following instructions. Mood changes, including anxiety, depression, irritability, and social withdrawal, are also frequent. Personality shifts and increased confusion often occur, especially in later stages.

In addition to cognitive decline, physical symptoms may also emerge over time, such as difficulty walking, swallowing, or maintaining balance. These challenges can increase the need for caregiving and support.

Alzheimer's disease affects each person differently, so symptoms and their severity can vary widely. Comprehensive care often involves a multidisciplinary team to address medical, emotional, and social needs.

What Are the Symptoms of Dementia?

Dementia is a broad term describing a decline in cognitive function severe enough to interfere with daily life and independence. Symptoms typically include

- » Memory loss
- » Difficulty concentrating or thinking clearly
- » Language problems
- » Changes in mood or behavior

People with dementia may become confused about time or place, struggle with familiar tasks, and exhibit personality changes. The specific symptoms and their progression depend on the underlying cause of dementia, with each type having particular characteristics and prognosis.

Because dementia can result from various diseases — including Alzheimer's, vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, and fronto-temporal dementia — diagnosis often requires careful assessment.



TIP

Some conditions can mimic dementia, so it's vital that people get a thorough and accurate assessment to rule out other causes of cognitive impairment. Treatment and management strategies differ depending on the type of dementia and its cause.

How Does Alzheimer's Disease Affect the Brain?

Alzheimer's disease causes the accumulation of specific abnormal proteins called *amyloid plaques* and *tau tangles*, which disrupt the normal functioning of brain cells. These changes begin in areas critical for memory and learning, disrupting the connections between nerve cells and eventually causing cell death. As the disease advances, it spreads to other regions of the brain, leading to brain shrinkage and widespread cognitive decline.

Research continues to explore the exact causes and mechanisms behind these protein accumulations, as well as potential treatments to prevent or reduce their impact. Genetics, lifestyle factors, and other health conditions may influence the risk and progression of Alzheimer's. *Oxidative stress*, an imbalance between *free radicals* (unstable molecules that can react with and damage cells) and *antioxidants* (molecules that neutralize free radicals and protect cells) that can damage cells, is increasingly recognized as a key contributor to the disease process. Understanding these processes is key to developing future therapies aimed at halting or reversing brain damage.

How Does Dementia Affect the Brain?

Dementia results from damage to brain cells that impairs their ability to communicate effectively. The pattern and location of this damage vary depending on the type of dementia:

- » **Vascular dementia** is caused by reduced blood flow to the brain, which can present with gradual deterioration if a person suffers from repeated small strokes.
- » **Lewy body dementia** involves abnormal protein deposits, called *Lewy bodies*, which are different from those that cause Alzheimer's disease. This damage disrupts memory, thinking, behavior, and daily

functioning. Over time, brain function declines progressively, affecting a person's ability to live independently.

- » **Frontotemporal dementia** results from progressive damage to the frontal and temporal lobes, although the exact cause is often unclear. This damage leads to changes in personality, behavior, and language.
- » **Mixed dementia** occurs when more than one type of problem, most commonly Alzheimer's disease, combined with vascular damage, contributes to cognitive decline, producing overlapping symptoms.



TIP

In some cases, dementia can be caused or worsened by treatable conditions such as vitamin deficiencies, infections, or medication side effects. Early diagnosis and intervention can help manage symptoms and improve outcomes. Supportive care, cognitive therapies, and lifestyle changes can also help maintain brain health and slow decline, illustrating the importance of a holistic approach to dementia care.

DID YOU KNOW?

Adopting a healthy lifestyle with regular exercise, eating a good diet, and staying mentally active and socially connected can reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease by as much as 40 percent.

Chapter 4

Reducing the Risk of Alzheimer's and Dementia

If you're reading this book because someone you love has Alzheimer's disease or dementia, and you want to know what you can do to reduce your risk of developing these conditions, this is the chapter for you. Here, I explain the steps you can take to minimize your risk.



TIP

If you already have an Alzheimer's disease or dementia diagnosis, it's important to note that you aren't to blame for your diagnosis. It's also encouraging to know that there are things you can do to possibly slow its progression and improve your quality of life.

Can Alzheimer's Disease Be Prevented?

There is currently no guaranteed way to prevent Alzheimer's disease, but growing evidence suggests that making certain lifestyle changes can significantly reduce the risk. These include staying physically active, keeping your mind engaged, not smoking, managing blood pressure and cholesterol, eating a healthy diet, and staying socially connected. Research indicates an association with these healthy lifestyle patterns and a lower incidence of Alzheimer's disease.

Emerging evidence also highlights the importance of addressing *oxidative stress*, an imbalance between *free radicals* (unstable molecules that can react with and damage cells) and *anti-oxidants* (molecules that neutralize free radicals and protect cells) that can damage brain cells, as a potential factor in Alzheimer's development. Antioxidant-rich diets and lifestyle choices that reduce inflammation may help counteract this process.



Although genetics play a role, proactive health behaviors offer meaningful ways to lower risk and support brain resilience over time, perhaps preventing or reducing the rate of progression of the disease.

Can Dementia Be Prevented?

Not all cases of dementia can be prevented, but up to 40 percent may be linked to risk factors that can be modified. The prevention of vascular dementia is particularly achievable with lifestyle patterns, such as having a healthy diet; getting plenty of exercise; achieving good weight; managing cholesterol, blood sugar, and blood pressure; and not smoking. Reducing the risks of cardiovascular disease by maintaining healthy blood vessels makes it possible to delay or even prevent the onset of dementia in many people.

Recent studies emphasize the value of preventive strategies that target both cognitive and cardiovascular health, because the two are closely linked. Early intervention and education about healthy habits can empower people to make informed choices. Public health initiatives and community support are also important for encouraging lifestyle changes on a broader scale.

What Role Does the Mediterranean Diet Play in Reducing the Risk of Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia?

The Mediterranean diet has been studied for its benefits to brain health. It's rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, fish, herbs, spices, and extra-virgin olive oil, and low in red meat and processed foods. This way of eating supports heart and blood vessel health, reduces inflammation, and provides protective antioxidants, all of which may help to preserve cognitive function and reduce the risk of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. A review of 23 studies published in 2024 confirmed that adherence to the Mediterranean diet is associated with an 11 percent to 30 percent reduction in the risk of age-related cognitive disorder, including dementia and Alzheimer's disease.



TIP

Research suggests that the Mediterranean diet's high content of *polyphenols* (plant compounds known for their antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, often contributing to the color and flavor of fruits, vegetables, and other plant-based foods), especially from extra-virgin olive oil, nuts, and berries, contributes to its neuroprotective effects. Adopting this dietary pattern, even in later life, has been associated with improved memory and slower rates of cognitive impairment.

How Does the MIND Diet Differ from the Mediterranean Diet in Protecting against Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia?

The Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay (MIND) diet is a hybrid of the Mediterranean and Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diets, specifically designed to protect the brain. The DASH diet is similar to the Mediterranean diet and was originally designed to combat *hypertension* (high blood pressure). It places particular emphasis on high-polyphenol leafy green vegetables, berries, and healthy fats like extra-virgin olive oil, while limiting foods high in saturated fats such as butter, cheese, sweets, and commercially fried fast foods.

Studies suggest that people who closely follow the MIND diet may significantly lower their risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health notes that the MIND diet's effects on cognition may be greater than those of the Mediterranean or DASH diets alone, but more research is needed for definitive conclusions.

In some respects, this may be a false comparison because following the MIND diet closely could

simply reflect an optimal version of the Mediterranean diet, given the overlap in their core components and brain-healthy foods.

What Lifestyle Changes Can Help Reduce the Risk of Developing Alzheimer's Disease?

There is no guaranteed way to prevent Alzheimer's disease, but adopting a brain-healthy lifestyle has been shown to help lower risk. Key strategies include getting regular physical activity; following a Mediterranean-style diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and healthy fats like nuts and extra-virgin olive oil; and engaging in mental stimulation.

Getting quality sleep, managing stress, avoiding harmful substances such as tobacco and excess alcohol, and maintaining social connections also support brain health. Controlling chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and cholesterol is important not just for reducing the risk of vascular dementia. These lifestyle changes, all of which reduce oxidative stress and inflammation, which play a part in the development of the disease, collectively contribute to long-term cognitive resilience and may reduce the risk of Alzheimer's.

What Lifestyle Changes Can Help Reduce the Risk of Developing Dementia?


What is good for the heart is good for the head. Preventing vascular dementia in particular depends on addressing cardiovascular risk factors such as smoking, poor diet, a sedentary lifestyle, and poor blood pressure or cholesterol control. Through managing these factors, it is possible to reduce the risks of the blood vessel damage that leads to heart disease, stroke, and vascular dementia.

The exact causes of Parkinson's disease and associated dementia are not clear, however, increased risks appear to be associated with recurrent head injuries and persistent exposure to some agricultural chemicals, including pesticides and herbicides. Avoiding these potential harms may lower the chances of developing this form of dementia, though more research is needed.

Does Aluminum in Cookware or Antiperspirants Cause Alzheimer's Disease?

Research findings of higher aluminum in Alzheimer's brain tissue in the 1970s led to concerns that exposure to high levels of

environmental aluminum and other metals may cause the condition. This was called the *aluminum hypothesis*. However, subsequent research has been complex and inconsistent, with some studies supporting a possible role and others finding no significant link. The scientific community now generally considers the evidence inconclusive, and most experts are no longer seriously concerned about routine aluminum exposure as a major factor in Alzheimer's disease.



Coping with Alzheimer's and Dementia

IN THIS PART . . .

This part offers help on living with Alzheimer's or dementia — including steps you can take to improve your own quality of life or that of a loved one living with the disease. It discusses possible treatment options and explains how you can stay informed and participate in research.

DID YOU KNOW?

Many people live for many years after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or dementia. Staying active, purposeful, and socially connected helps to maximize quality of life with the condition.

Chapter 5

Living with Alzheimer's or Dementia

A diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or dementia can be frightening, but you can take steps to maintain a high quality of life even as you cope with the disease. This chapter outlines the challenges you may face and offers hopeful steps you can take on the journey ahead. It also covers topics such as

financial planning and legal considerations — all part of living with these conditions.

If you're looking for answers on the ups and downs of living with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, read on.

What Are the Challenges of Living with Alzheimer's Disease?

Living with Alzheimer's disease involves new challenges and experiences for the person with the condition, as well as loved ones and carers, as the disease progresses. Early on, people often experience memory loss, confusion, and difficulty with problem-solving and decision-making. As Alzheimer's advances, recognizing loved ones, navigating familiar environments, and managing daily tasks like cooking, dressing, and personal hygiene become increasingly difficult. Communication also suffers, with challenges in finding words, following conversations, and expressing needs.

Emotional and psychological difficulties are common, including frustration, anxiety, depression, and grief over the loss of independence and cognitive abilities. Behavioral changes such as agitation,

wandering, and sleep disturbances can complicate care and daily life. It's important to use the resources available to access the support needed.

What Are the Challenges of Living with Dementia?

Living with dementia means adapting to challenges that vary depending on the type and stage of the condition. Many of the difficulties with any form of dementia are similar to those with Alzheimer's disease as cognition deteriorates, but some unique concerns are specific to different types of dementia:

- » Vascular dementia may affect movement and physical health; it may also cause sudden declines after strokes.
- » Lewy body dementia often involves visual hallucinations, fluctuating alertness, and some mobility and movement symptoms similar to Parkinson's disease.
- » Frontotemporal dementia is characterized by early personality changes, loss of inhibition, and behavioral issues.

These variations make living with dementia unpredictable and complex, impacting both the individual and their caregivers.

How Can I Cope with the Emotional Impact of Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Receiving a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or dementia, whether for yourself or a loved one, can bring feelings of shock, sadness, fear, or even guilt. These emotions are natural and often evolve over time. Coping starts with acknowledging the feelings and seeking support from others, whether through family and friends, counseling, or a local support group. Staying informed about the condition and connecting with others in similar situations can ease the sense of isolation. Taking care of your physical and emotional health is important as well.



TIP

Having a greater understanding of the underlying condition and its prognosis can often help with anticipating and preparing for changes that may occur as it progresses.

How Can I Manage the Symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Managing symptoms of Alzheimer's disease or dementia involves a combination of medical treatment, lifestyle adjustments and

adaptations, self-care, and emotional support. Medications may help with memory, mood, or sleep (see Chapter 6).



TIP

Even more important are non-drug approaches like keeping a consistent daily routine, having gentle reminders and encouragement, and offering plenty of reassurance. Physical activity, a healthy diet like the Mediterranean diet, social interaction, and mentally stimulating activities can also help slow symptom progression and maintain quality of life. Working closely with healthcare professionals, family, and friends, it's possible to create a personalized plan tailored to an individual. If appropriate, this plan can include provisions for anticipating each stage of the condition.

What Are the Common Behavioral Changes in Alzheimer's Disease?

In Alzheimer's disease, behavioral changes are experienced as the condition progresses. Common symptoms include agitation, anxiety, restlessness, and sometimes suspicion or paranoia. Individuals may also become withdrawn, confused, or depressed, particularly as they struggle to understand or adapt to their environment. *Sundowning* (an increase in confusion and agitation during the late afternoon or evening) is a frequent feature.

Although these changes are typical in Alzheimer's, the presentation can be nuanced. Early stages may primarily involve memory and confusion, but as the disease advances, mood swings and emotional distress can become more pronounced. Distinct from other dementias, Alzheimer's tends to present these behavioral symptoms alongside progressive memory loss and cognitive decline.

What Are the Common Behavioral Changes in Dementia?

Behavioral changes in dementia vary significantly depending on the underlying cause. Alzheimer's disease is a distinct type of dementia with characteristic patterns of behavioral changes, though this may vary from person to person. Other forms of dementia may share some features of presentation, as well as have recognizably different features:

- » **Vascular dementia:** Mood swings, *apathy* (indifference), and difficulties with impulse control or judgment, sometimes accompanied by a gradual decline in function after strokes or mini-strokes

- » **Lewy body dementia and Parkinson's dementia:** Visual hallucinations, delusions, and fluctuating cognition
- » **Frontotemporal dementia:** Early and pronounced personality changes, loss of inhibition, and compulsive behaviors

If I Have Early-Stage Alzheimer's Disease, How Can I Remain Socially and Mentally Active?

In early-stage Alzheimer's disease, staying socially and mentally active is important for emotional well-being and cognitive health, especially if the experience is shared with a loved one. You can continue to participate in hobbies, clubs, classes, or volunteer activities that you've enjoyed prior to your diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease.



TIP

Engaging in puzzles and creative activities or learning new skills helps stimulate and maintain cognitive skills, though it is important to avoid frustration or anxiety if these prove difficult for you.

Can Certain Foods Help Prevent or Delay Cognitive Decline in Alzheimer’s Disease or Dementia?

A variety of foods — including berries, leafy greens, nuts, fatty fish, and whole grains — are linked to better brain health and reduced risk of cognitive decline, especially as part of diets like the Mediterranean diet and the Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay (MIND) diet (see Chapter 4). Among these, extra-virgin olive oil stands out for its unique benefits, thanks to its high content of *polyphenols* (powerful antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds found in significant amounts only in extra-virgin olive oil, not in refined olive oils).



TIP

Regular use of extra-virgin olive oil has been associated with slower cognitive decline and improved memory, likely due to polyphenols such as oleocanthal and oleuropein, which help protect brain cells and reduce oxidative stress. Choosing polyphenol-rich extra-virgin olive oil as part of a healthy diet is a simple but effective way to support long-term cognitive resilience.

What Role Does Music Therapy Play in Improving Quality of Life for People with Dementia?

Music therapy is a powerful tool for improving quality of life in people with dementia. Familiar songs can evoke memories, lift mood, and reduce agitation and anxiety. Engaging with music through listening, singing, or movement can improve communication, coordination, and emotional expression.

A 2023 review of studies across three continents found that music therapy improved cognitive function and reduced symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and agitation in people with Alzheimer's disease. Active interventions like singing and combined musical techniques were especially effective.

Because music activates brain areas that are often preserved longer in Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, it remains a meaningful form of engagement even in later stages. Music can foster connection, reduce feelings of isolation, and improve overall well-being for both individuals with dementia and their caregivers.

What Are the Benefits of Joining a Support Group?

Support groups offer a safe space to share experiences, learn practical tips, and feel understood by people who are on a similar journey with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or dementia. They can reduce feelings of isolation, stress, and burn-out, and provide emotional comfort and encouragement. Leaders and members of such groups can help with navigating healthcare systems, empathizing with the challenges, as well as sharing experiences of therapies or resources that have been helpful. Sometimes a group will invite a speaker to attend who has a particular area of expertise that can help members of the group.

Support groups not only put you in touch with others who are experiencing similar challenges of living with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, but also frequently provide educational and material resources that you may otherwise be unaware of.

How Can I Find a Support Group for People with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

You can usually find a local support group by asking your healthcare professional or social worker, who should be aware of organizations

that have regular online or in-person meetings for practical and emotional support. Groups that are run by nonprofit organizations like the Alzheimer's Foundation of America in the US and the Alzheimer's Society in the UK often have information online about where and when meetings take place.

How Can I Plan for the Future with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Planning ahead after a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or dementia is important to ensure that your wishes, needs, and values are respected as the condition progresses. This process should include making legal, financial, and medical decisions early, such as setting up a *durable power of attorney* (also known as a *lasting power of attorney*; see the next section for more information).

You'll also need to create or update your *advance care plan* (a voluntary record of preferences, values, and wishes for future care) and discuss housing or care preferences. It's also important to explore your support networks, care options, and community resources to ensure ongoing assistance and social engagement.

This may seem daunting at first, but with help and support from family and friends, as well as healthcare, financial, and legal professionals,

you can make plans that can bring peace of mind and anticipate some of the challenges that may arise. It's important to remember that arrangements need reviewing and often adapting if new or unexpected developments come up.

What Are the Legal and Financial Considerations If I Have Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

As dementia progresses, it's important to ensure measures are in place to protect your wishes, dignity, and finances. Many decisions can be made by relatives and healthcare professionals in a person's best interest if they lack the capacity to make judgments, but it's much better to have plans in place. Important legal steps include assigning a durable power of attorney for health and financial decisions, which allows nominated individuals to act on a person's behalf. Creating or updating a will and discussing advance care planning can make decisions much more straightforward.

Financially, it's important to review benefits eligibility, manage banking and insurance, and understand long-term care costs. Addressing these issues early, while you can still be involved, can reduce future stress for everyone concerned.

Many countries have developed their own legal frameworks to support people with dementia. In many countries, including the US, Canada, Australia, and most of Europe, for example, there are detailed regulations around guardianship and advance directives, and these often emphasize respect for autonomy and minimal intervention.

In circumstances where a person has been formally assessed to have limited capacity to make informed decisions, and where there is concern for their welfare with no agreed care planning or guardianship, it's sometimes necessary for the legal system to take action to protect their interests. This process can be a lengthy and complicated one. That's why doing as much planning as you can as soon as you can is best.

What Financial Planning Tools Are Available for Families Dealing with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Many countries have introduced financial planning tools and legal mechanisms to support people with dementia and their families. Across different legal systems, the focus is increasingly on protecting vulnerable individuals, ensuring access to benefits, and maintaining dignity throughout the course of the disease.

Families can often access a range of tools to help manage the financial impact of dementia. These include durable power of attorney to allow someone to make financial decisions on behalf of the person affected. Social services may be able to recommend financial advisers with experience in care planning.

It may also be helpful to explore care cost calculators, government benefits like Medicaid (in the US) or Attendance Allowance (in the UK), and insurance products such as long-term care policies. Some charities and dementia support organizations offer free financial guidance to help families make informed decisions or even monetary support if needed.

DID YOU KNOW?

Although there is no cure for Alzheimer's or dementia, a healthy lifestyle can slow the progression and help to preserve cognitive function.

Chapter 6

Considering Treatment Options

When you're diagnosed with Alzheimer's or dementia, you may assume no treatments are available. Although the diseases can't be cured, medications and lifestyle modifications can slow the progression and improve your quality of life. Being aware of what's possible will empower you to talk with your healthcare provider. And that's what this chapter is all about.

What Treatments Are Available for Alzheimer's Disease?

Currently, there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, but medications are available to help manage symptoms and slow progression. Some examples of medications that are commonly prescribed for people with Alzheimer's disease include the following:

- » A class of drugs known as acetylcholinesterase inhibitors, including the following:
 - Donepezil
 - Galantamine
 - Rivastigmine
- » Memantine

These medications help maintain communication between brain cells and regulate brain chemicals linked to memory and learning. They may help some people, but their benefits are often limited.

Drugs are also occasionally used in emergencies to sedate or alter dangerous behavior, but there are ethical concerns with medications that have been called “chemical straightjackets.” Newer therapies, including monoclonal antibodies, aim

to reduce the buildup of abnormal proteins like amyloid, although their effectiveness and safety are still being studied.



TIP

Alongside medication, staying mentally active, and living a brain-healthy lifestyle (including diet, exercise, and social engagement) are crucial for maintaining quality of life. Research shows that combining medical treatment with supportive care can help individuals remain independent and engaged for longer.

What Treatments Are Available for Dementia?

Treatment for dementia varies depending on the cause, but most approaches aim to relieve symptoms, support quality of life, and if possible, delay or prevent further deterioration. For Alzheimer's and related dementias, medications may help with memory, mood, or behavior (see the preceding section for a list of some of the medications commonly used). In vascular dementia, managing risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, poor diet, and lifestyle is essential to slow the progression.

Supportive approaches — which may include cognitive therapy or counselling, *complementary therapies* (treatments designed to enhance

medical therapies), caregiver support, and social activities— are also vital. These strategies help maintain independence and well-being, while lifestyle changes and early intervention can make a meaningful difference in the course of the disease.

Are There Any Natural or Lifestyle-Based Treatments That Support Brain Health in Dementia?

A growing body of research highlights the importance of lifestyle in protecting brain health and potentially slowing dementia progression. Following diets like the Mediterranean diet or Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay (MIND) diet (see Chapter 4), staying physically and mentally active, and maintaining social connections are all associated with slowing the progression of dementia. Managing conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and other cardiovascular risk factors is also important.

Getting enough sleep, reducing stress, and avoiding smoking and excessive alcohol support brain function as well. These lifestyle measures, when combined, offer a powerful way to promote long-term cognitive health and well-being.

What Complementary Therapies Are Commonly Used by People with Alzheimer's Disease?

Many people with Alzheimer's disease use complementary therapies to enhance comfort and quality of life. Approaches such as music therapy, aromatherapy, and art or reminiscence therapy can stimulate memory, reduce agitation, and foster emotional connections.

It may not always be possible for a person with Alzheimer's disease to express a desire to access therapies like these, but a good complementary therapist should be able to approach a patient, seek their consent with compassion and empathy, and appreciate verbal or nonverbal feedback about how they're responding.

DID YOU KNOW?

You don't need a diagnosis of dementia to participate in research. You can often join population observational studies by sharing data or having health checks, especially if you have a family history of dementia.

Chapter 7

Staying Informed and Participating in Research

An important way to prevent yourself from feeling powerless — which is common when dealing with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or dementia — is by staying informed about advancements in research. You may even decide to participate in research as a subject, whether you have the disease or one of your loved ones has it. This chapter explains how to make sure you're getting accurate information and what questions to ask before participating in research.

How Can I Stay Informed about Alzheimer's Disease?

To remain up to date on Alzheimer's disease, you can connect with reputable health organizations and research institutions that focus on brain health and aging. Organizations such as the Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org) and the National Institute on Aging (NIA; www.nia.nih.gov) offer newsletters, educational articles, and updates on the latest breakthroughs in research and care. There are equivalent associations offering similar resources in different countries and regions of the world.

Joining online or in-person support communities can also keep you connected to new information, practical advice, and the experiences of others living with or affected by Alzheimer's disease. Your healthcare specialist should be able to suggest good local or national support networks.

How Can I Stay Informed about Dementia?

To stay well-informed about dementia, it's important to connect with organizations that specialize in the specific type of dementia you want to learn about (for example, vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, or frontotemporal dementia). In the US, organizations such as

the American Stroke Association (www.stroke.org) and the Lewy Body Dementia Association (www.lbda.org) focus on those specific types of dementia.

In the UK, resources like the Stroke Association (www.stroke.org.uk) and Parkinson's UK (www.parkinsons.org.uk) offer tailored information and support for people affected by vascular dementia or Parkinson's disease dementia. Dementia UK (www.dementiauk.org) and Age UK (www.ageuk.org.uk) also provide comprehensive advice and community-based support for all types of dementia.

There are also global organizations, such as Dementia Alliance International (<https://dementiaallianceinternational.org>), which provide support and educational resources for people living with any type of dementia worldwide. Many other groups and charities in different countries work to support those affected by the full range of dementia causes.

How Can I Find Trustworthy Sources of Information Online about Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

To find reliable information online, look for websites run by established health organizations, universities, or government agencies.

Trusted sources in the US and UK, for example, include the Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org), NIA (www.nia.nih.gov), Alzheimers.gov (www.alzheimers.gov), and Alzheimer's Society (www.alzheimers.org.uk). These sites provide evidence-based information, are regularly updated, and are reviewed by medical experts.

Avoid sources that promote unproven treatments or that do not clearly cite their information. Always verify that the content is current and supported by scientific research.

What Are the Latest Research Developments in Alzheimer's Disease?

Recent research in Alzheimer's disease is focused on developing treatments that target the underlying brain changes, such as the accumulation of amyloid and tau proteins. New medications, including anti-amyloid antibodies, have shown promise in clinical trials by reducing amyloid plaques and delaying the onset of symptoms in people at high genetic risk. Scientists are also developing blood tests and better imaging for earlier and more accurate diagnosis. Additionally, lifestyle studies are exploring how diet, exercise, and sleep may help protect brain health and slow disease progression.

What Are the Latest Research Developments in Dementia?

Dementia research is expanding to better understand not only Alzheimer's disease but also other types, such as vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, Parkinson's dementia, and frontotemporal dementia. Ongoing studies are investigating how factors like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, inflammation, and gut health influence cognitive decline in these dementia types. Advances in treatments for vascular dementia include new therapies that reduce blood pressure and cholesterol and address other factors associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

How Can I Participate in Alzheimer's Disease Research?

Participation in Alzheimer's research can take many forms, including enrolling in clinical studies for new therapies, observational research about your lifestyle, or investigations of the health of caregivers. Involvement may require sharing health information, completing memory tests, providing blood samples, or trying experimental treatments. To find out more about research programs, you can consult your healthcare provider or use online clinical trial

finders like those provided by organizations that support people with Alzheimer's disease.

How Can I Participate in Dementia Research?

There are similar opportunities for research participation in other forms of dementia as there are for Alzheimer's disease (see the preceding section). Studies may be focused on factors that lead to vascular, Parkinson's, Lewy body, frontotemporal, or other rarer causes of dementia. Organizations that support people with these specific types of dementia are often well placed to recruit volunteers for research and can, with appropriate consent, connect suitable people with dementia with academic institutions or other groups involved in research projects.

What Questions Should I Ask Before Enrolling in a Clinical Trial for Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Clinical trials in most countries are overseen and regulated to ensure that they're ethical and that the study protocol meets clear standards, but it's important to make sure the researchers are from a reputable institution.



TIP

Before joining a clinical trial, ask about the study's purpose, what your involvement will entail, and any potential risks or side effects. Clarify whether the treatment is experimental, how your health will be monitored, and whether you'll receive the results of the study. Ask about the time commitment, any travel requirements, and your right to withdraw at any time. Understanding these details will help you make an informed decision about participation.

How Can I Educate Others about Alzheimer's Disease?

To educate others about Alzheimer's disease, you can share accurate information in clear, compassionate language. You can pass on personal experiences, explain the difference between Alzheimer's disease and normal aging, describe the stages of the disease, and discuss how families and communities can support those affected.

It's important to dispel myths. You can use personal stories, especially where you have witnessed some positive or helpful ways in which a person with Alzheimer's disease may experience improvements to their quality of life. Encouraging open, stigma-free conversations helps increase awareness and empathy. It also creates hope for others who may be affected by the disease.

How Can I Educate Others about Dementia?

Educating others about dementia starts with helping people understand that it's not one condition but a group of disorders, each with distinct symptoms and progression. This can help people appreciate the different characteristics and understand why there may be particular challenges associated with differing types and causes of dementia.



Supporting Someone with Alzheimer's or Dementia

IN THIS PART . . .

This part explains how you can help someone with Alzheimer's or dementia, the ethical considerations of caring for someone with the disease, medical complications you may encounter along the way, and end-of-life decisions you may have to face. It also covers the extremely important topic of finding the support you need as a caregiver.

Whether you're serving as a caregiver for a loved one with Alzheimer's or dementia, or you have a friend or neighbor with the disease and you want to know what you can do to help, this part is for you.

DID YOU KNOW?

Family caregivers provide over 80 percent of dementia care, often without formal training, financial support, or the opportunity for a break.

Chapter 8

Helping Someone Live with Alzheimer's or Dementia

If your spouse, parent, sibling, or other loved one has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or dementia, your head may be spinning with questions about what you can do to help with their care. This chapter covers the big questions you need answers to — everything from how you can help and what kinds of challenges you can expect to face, to how to communicate with your loved one or help them meet their nutritional needs.

How Can I Support Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Supporting someone with Alzheimer's disease or dementia requires a thoughtful combination of practical assistance, emotional understanding, and patience. You can help by creating a calm, safe environment, maintaining simple routines, and using clear, gentle communication. Encouraging independence in daily tasks, such as dressing or eating, while providing subtle support when needed can boost confidence and self-esteem.



TIP

Your loved one's healthcare team may include specialist nurses who can help you with ideas and strategies that are known to improve a person's quality of life.

Equally important is showing empathy and kindness, especially when memory loss or confusion makes conversations challenging. It's usually best to gently guide a person with dementia rather than correct them. Staying connected and involved helps the person feel valued and less isolated, which is vital for their emotional well-being. Regular social interaction and meaningful activities can also help slow cognitive decline and improve their experience.

How Can I Help My Loved One Maintain Quality of Life with Alzheimer's Disease?

Maintaining quality of life with Alzheimer's disease is about supporting abilities and interests while adapting to changes. Establishing simple, consistent routines helps reduce confusion and anxiety. Accessing medical care, staying physically active through exercise, and engaging in social activities can improve mood and cognitive function.

Encouraging participation in familiar hobbies, music, meaningful relationships, and social connectedness maintains joy and purpose. Using memory aids, such as calendars and labels, can support independence. Involving the person in decision-making for as long as possible respects their autonomy and dignity. Creating a supportive, safe environment and providing emotional reassurance are also important in enhancing quality of life.

How Can I Help My Loved One Maintain Quality of Life with Dementia?

People living with different types of dementia can maintain a good quality of life with similar strategies (see the preceding section), but there

may be subtle differences in approach depending on the type of dementia.

For example, with vascular dementia and Parkinson's dementia, maintaining quality of life involves accessing treatment and care from specialists in these specific conditions for therapies that may slow the rate of decline of physical health, as well as cognition.

In frontotemporal dementia, it's important to ensure a safe environment where any behavioral challenges can be managed to protect the person concerned and others who may be affected. The fluctuating levels of thinking ability and self-awareness in people with Lewy body dementia make it challenging to maintain independence and preserve quality of life for as long as possible.

What Are the Challenges of Caring for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Caring for someone with dementia is often rewarding, but it also brings significant challenges. Managing memory loss, confusion, mood swings, and behavioral changes, such as agitation, aggression, or wandering, can be physically and emotionally exhausting. As the

disease progresses, the person may require help with basic tasks like eating, dressing, and personal care, which increases the demands on caregivers.

The emotional toll of witnessing a loved one's decline can lead to stress, burnout, and feelings of grief, especially if the person doesn't recognize their family or demonstrates challenging beliefs or behaviors. Caregivers may also struggle with balancing their own needs with those of the person they care for. Seeking support from health professionals and connecting with other caregivers through support groups can provide practical advice and emotional comfort and help lighten the load.



TIP

There may come a time when your loved one needs professional care or admission to a residential home. Making these best-interest decisions can be especially difficult, particularly if the person with dementia doesn't have the capacity to express their own view.

How Can Knowing a Person's History Help with Dementia Care?

Understanding a person's background and their personal life story can help in delivering personalized, respectful, and effective dementia

care. Awareness of their spiritual beliefs, preferences, hobbies, and significant life events allows caregivers to tailor routines, conversations, and activities to their unique needs.

For example, if the person was a musician, you can provide them with access to playing an instrument; someone who was an artist may be given the equipment to paint. This person-centered approach provides context for interpreting behaviors, because challenging moments may reflect past experiences or deeply held values.

Many residential care environments are decorated in styles that evoke memories appropriate for certain age cohorts of residents, such as familiar pictures from past eras.

How Can I Manage the Daily Care Needs of Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Daily care for someone with Alzheimer's disease or dementia can involve a wide range of tasks, from personal hygiene to helping with meals and dressing to managing medications and providing emotional support and reassurance.



TIP

Establishing a predictable daily routine can help reduce confusion and anxiety, making the person feel more secure.

Adapting care strategies to meet changing needs is essential as the condition progresses. Seek help from healthcare professionals, support groups, or respite care services when necessary. Caregivers should also prioritize their own well-being, because caregiving is physically and emotionally demanding.

What Are the Communication Challenges in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

As Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia progress, people often face a range of communication difficulties that impact daily interactions and relationships. In the early stages, a person may have trouble finding the right words or remembering names. As the disease advances, they may repeat themselves, struggle to follow complex sentences, or lose track of what they or others are saying. Familiar objects may become difficult to name, and abstract or complex ideas can be especially challenging to grasp.

In later stages, verbal communication often diminishes, and nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and even

touch, become increasingly significant for understanding and connection. These changes can be frustrating and distressing for both the person with dementia and their caregivers or loved ones.

How Can I Improve Communication with Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Effectively communicating with someone who has dementia starts with patience, empathy, and a calm, reassuring presence. Use simple sentences, speak slowly and clearly, and maintain eye contact to help the person focus. Ask one question at a time, and allow extra time for them to process and respond. Avoid rushing or interrupting.



TIP

Try not to correct or argue if the person makes mistakes. Instead, gently redirect the conversation or offer reassurance if they seem confused or upset. Nonverbal cues, such as a warm smile, gentle touch, or positive body language, can help convey comfort and understanding when words are hard to find. Creating a quiet, familiar setting and minimizing distractions also supports better connection and helps the person feel more secure and understood.

What Are the Nutritional Needs of Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

A good diet is important for a person with Alzheimer's disease or dementia — a healthy diet supports both physical health and cognitive function. Eating a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins (such as poultry, fish, beans, and nuts), and healthy fats (like those found in extra-virgin olive oil and avocados) provides essential nutrients that help maintain energy, muscle strength, and brain health. Diets such as the Mediterranean diet and the Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay (MIND) diet (see Chapter 4) have shown promise in supporting cognitive health and possibly slowing disease progression. It's also important to have familiar and enjoyable foods that add to a person's quality of life.

As dementia advances, caregivers should be alert for signs of unintentional weight loss and potential nutritional deficiencies. These can be a result of difficulties with swallowing, changes in appetite, challenges with communicating, or increasing *apathy* (indifference) about eating. Addressing eating difficulties can involve frequent, smaller meals; convenient finger foods; and nutritious snacks. For specific concerns, consult a dietitian or healthcare professional to ensure proper nutrition and safe swallowing.

How Can Hydration Be Maintained for Someone with Dementia Who Forgets to Drink Water?

Maintaining adequate hydration is vital for people with dementia, because they may forget to drink or not recognize or respond to thirst. Dehydration can lead to increased confusion, urinary tract infections, and other health complications. Encourage drinking regularly throughout the day with gentle prompts, especially in a warm environment.



TIP

Use clear or brightly colored cups to draw attention to an accessible drink.

In more advanced dementia, caregivers may need to monitor fluid intake and output and look for signs of dehydration, such as a dry mouth, concentrated urine, or increased confusion. Seek medical advice if you have concerns.

What Are the Mealtime and Eating Challenges for Someone with Mid- to Late-Stage Alzheimer's Disease?

Mealtime can become increasingly challenging as Alzheimer's disease or dementia progresses; this may lead to concerns about nutrition. A

person may forget to eat, fail to recognize food, or struggle with using utensils. Appetite may diminish, and the ability to chew and swallow can also present difficulties. Behavioral changes may interfere with eating if a person is agitated or drowsy during meals.

To address these problems, create a calm, quiet, and familiar environment for meals; present enjoyable, palatable foods; and provide gentle assistance with eating. In later stages, soft or pureed foods may be necessary to reduce the risk of choking. Encouraging independence as much as possible while ensuring safety and enjoyment can help make mealtime a positive experience.

What Are the Safety Concerns for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

As memory and thinking skills decline, safety can become a significant concern at home and in public places. Common risks include forgetting to turn off appliances, wandering, getting lost, falling, and having difficulty managing medications. Some people may misjudge distances, become confused about the time of day, or feel anxious in unfamiliar environments, increasing the likelihood of accidents or distress. The level of danger often depends on the stage of the dementia and the degree of insight the person has. There are particular times when it may be appropriate to consider hazards (for example,

with continuing to drive a car or live alone, without supervision or care).



TIP

These challenges make it important to regularly assess and adapt a person's living environment, and to consider extra help or care as needed. Caregivers should be alert to changes in the person's abilities and adjust safety measures accordingly.

How Can I Create a Safe Environment for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Creating a safe, familiar environment can minimize hazards while promoting as much independence as possible. A person with Alzheimer's disease or dementia may be vulnerable to risks due to cognitive decline, including memory problems or confusion, as well as increased physical frailty.

Simple strategies to make the environment safer may include removing tripping risks (such as loose rugs or clutter), adding handrails in key areas like bathrooms and stairways, and ensuring that lighting is bright and consistent throughout the home. Using appliance timers or safety shutoffs in the kitchen, and

keeping medications securely stored with clear reminders or in pill organizers can help prevent accidents and confusion. Also, make sure that hazardous substances like bleach, cleaning fluids, and disinfectants commonly used in the home are locked away. Sometimes it can help to label things around the house, too.

Advances in technology, used with a person's consent, can support independent living. For example, you may use a device with GPS or remote video monitoring if they're susceptible to wandering or at risk of falls or other hazards.

DID YOU KNOW?

Ethical considerations about dementia care often involve balancing dignity, autonomy, and safety, while taking into account the person's awareness and capacity to contribute to decision-making.

Chapter 9

Ethical and Advocacy Considerations

When you're serving as a caregiver for someone with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, you may be focused on meeting their daily needs (nutrition, water, a safe, comforting environment). But sometimes it helps to step back and consider the ethical considerations involved in care — for example, making decisions on their behalf, using

restraints, and end-of-life planning. You should also know how you can advocate for your loved one when they can't advocate for themselves. In this chapter, I walk you through these sensitive subjects.

What Are the Ethical Considerations in Alzheimer's Disease Care?

There are many ethical considerations in Alzheimer's disease care that are distinct from other illnesses. It's important to respect a person's autonomy while ensuring their safety, especially as memory and decision-making abilities decline. As the disease progresses, caregivers and healthcare professionals must decide when and how to intervene (for example, managing finances, driving, or making medical decisions), while trying to help the individual maintain their independence for as long as possible.

Informed consent is a central ethical challenge. It's important to ensure that the person understands and agrees to care decisions for as long as they retain capacity. Sensitive, person-centered care is essential, ideally guided by advance directives created earlier in the disease process; it should balance the individual's

right to live independently with the need to protect them from harm. Caregivers must always focus on the best interests of the person with Alzheimer's disease, transparent communication with all involved, and a primary aim to preserve dignity and quality of life.

What Are the Ethical Considerations in Dementia Care?

The principles of ethical considerations for Alzheimer's disease apply to all types of dementia, but there may be specific challenges relating to particular forms. For example, in fronto-temporal dementia, behavioral symptoms and personality changes may raise ethical concerns about accountability or consent, even when memory is relatively preserved. In Lewy body dementia, fluctuating cognition can complicate assessments of decision-making capacity. A professional with expertise in health, finances, and law, as it may apply to a person with dementia, may need to formally assess a person's capacity to make informed decisions.

Other ethical issues include the use of restraints, medication choices, and end-of-life planning, particularly in advanced stages

of any type of dementia. There are also broader social challenges, such as access to care and the investment of healthcare providers in care and treatments.

How Can I Advocate for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease?

Advocating for someone with Alzheimer's disease with their consent involves ensuring their wishes, rights, and dignity are respected, especially as they become less able to speak for themselves. This may involve helping them access the best available care and navigate healthcare and social care systems, as well as ensuring that legal arrangements like powers of attorney or advance care plans are in place. Advocacy also means promoting the person's involvement in decisions for as long as possible and speaking up on their behalf with doctors, social workers, and community services.

Advocacy for an individual is usually taken on by family or friends, though there are broader opportunities to support organizations like charities that lobby governments and healthcare institutions for policy changes or more resources and research to be invested in Alzheimer's disease care.

How Can I Advocate for Someone with Dementia?

Advocacy in dementia care must be tailored to the specific needs and symptoms of the person's dementia type. For example, people with vascular dementia and Parkinson's dementia may require coordinated care for physical disabilities with liaison between physicians, neurologists, and psychiatrists. People with Lewy body dementia may need protection from the harmful effects of certain medications. Younger individuals with frontotemporal dementia may face stigma, judgments about their behavior, or delays in diagnosis, requiring targeted support and awareness-raising efforts.

DID YOU KNOW?

Alzheimer's disease and other causes of dementia are amongst the top five most common causes of death in many countries, yet it is not widely recognized as a terminal illness.

Chapter **10** **Medical Complications and End-of-Life Care**

Alzheimer's disease and dementia typically bring medical complications as the disease progresses, including difficulty swallowing, infections, and mobility problems. As a caregiver, knowing what to expect can not only help you prepare but also help you focus on symptoms you may otherwise have overlooked. Finally, as you face the end of your loved one's life, you'll want to consider everything you can do to help them feel safe and comfortable, not only for their sake but for yours.

What Are the Common Medical Complications in Alzheimer's Disease?

As Alzheimer's disease progresses, a person may experience a range of medical complications because of the risks associated with cognitive decline, a poor nutritional or hydration state, and physical frailty. These include difficulty swallowing, which increases the risk of choking and can lead to aspiration pneumonia, where foods or fluids are inhaled rather than swallowed, causing a chest infection. Aspiration pneumonia is a leading cause of death in advanced Alzheimer's disease.

Other frequent complications are infections (such as urinary tract infections due to incontinence), respiratory illnesses, and weight loss (due to reduced appetite or swallowing difficulties). Mobility problems, including falls and fractures, become more common as coordination and balance decline. The risk of accidents associated with agitation also increases.

What Are the Common Medical Complications in Dementia?

People with dementia, depending on the type (such as vascular, Parkinson's, Lewy body, or fronto-temporal dementia), often face complications

similar to those in Alzheimer's disease. These include malnutrition and dehydration due to reduced intake or difficulties with eating and drinking, as well as a higher risk of infections, immobility, and falls.

Complications that are specific to a particular type of dementia may also occur. For example, in vascular dementia, other aspects of cardiovascular disease may need to be managed (such as heart conditions, diabetes, or kidney disease). Parkinson's dementia has special challenges with the unique physical manifestations of mobility. Lewy body dementia and frontotemporal dementia may increase the risk of physical harm during episodes of extreme agitation or hallucinations.

How Can I Manage Medical Complications in Alzheimer's Disease?

Managing complications in Alzheimer's disease involves close supervision, regular reviews, and early action if there are concerns about changes. Caregivers are uniquely able to watch for signs of illness (such as a fever or increased confusion), ensure proper nutrition and hydration, and support mobility through gentle activity to reduce the risk of falls and pressure sores. Creating a safe environment, adapting foods for easier swallowing, and maintaining a toileting schedule can help address incontinence and nutrition issues.

Coordination between healthcare professionals, caregivers, and family members who are often the first to spot changes in their loved one's condition is essential to anticipate and respond to emerging issues of medical complications promptly and effectively.

How Can I Manage Medical Complications in Dementia?

Managing medical complications in dementia requires an understanding that different types of dementia come with distinct patterns and risks. For example, caregivers of a person with vascular dementia should understand not only the complications that are shared with Alzheimer's disease, but also specific cardiovascular complications — someone with vascular dementia may be more prone to complications related to stroke, heart disease, or poor circulation, and it's possible that they may not be able to communicate clearly if, for example, they're experiencing chest pain associated with heart disease. Those with Lewy body dementia often experience visual hallucinations, movement problems, and sensitivity to certain medications, especially antipsychotics. In frontotemporal dementia, behavioral changes and impulsivity may pose safety risks or lead to neglected health needs.



TIP

Caregivers can play a vital role by observing subtle shifts and understanding, and anticipating the specific complications that may occur in different types of dementia.

What Should I Know about Pain Management in the Late Stages of Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

In late-stage dementia of any type, a person may not be able to express pain clearly, so it's important to watch for subtle signs, such as grimacing, moaning, or changes in movement or behavior. Pain can be managed with medications, gentle repositioning, massage, or other comfort measures. Healthcare professionals often use pain assessment tools designed for people with dementia to guide treatment, always with the goal of easing suffering and preserving quality of life.

Medications may be prescribed and administered if healthcare professionals determine that a person requires pain relief. At the end of life, strong pain medications like morphine can greatly ease discomfort, which is a priority, but they may also slow breathing enough to potentially shorten life slightly. This presents a sensitive and emotional decision, because families and caregivers must balance the need to relieve suffering with the understanding that these medicines may bring death a little closer.

What Are the End-of-Life Considerations for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease?

In the final stages of Alzheimer's disease, a person may typically experience further memory loss, increased confusion, difficulty swallowing, and total dependence for daily care. End-of-life planning usually seeks to plan for the expected gradual decline in cognitive and physical function, and focus on maintaining comfort, peace, dignity, and a familiar environment. Important considerations include completing advance care directives, determining preferences around hospitalization and resuscitation, and arranging palliative or hospice support where needed. Emotional support for the person and their family is essential, as is managing symptoms such as pain, agitation, or difficulty breathing, with the aim of creating a calm and reassuring setting. Medical input is essential because drugs for symptom management are often required.

What Are the End-of-Life Considerations for Someone with Dementia?

End-of-life care for someone with dementia varies depending on the type of dementia and its symptoms. For example, people with Lewy body dementia may face more rapid fluctuations

in alertness and a higher risk of hallucinations and agitation, which may need more intensive medical management, while those with vascular dementia may progress in a more stepwise pattern, where there are distinct episodes of deterioration, with additional complications like a stroke, heart attack, or kidney failure. A person with frontotemporal dementia may still appear physically strong but struggle with disinhibition or impulsivity, making care more complex. Planning ahead is vital to reflect the person's wishes, but so is adapting to the unique care challenges presented by their specific dementia type. Effective symptom management, emotional reassurance, and collaboration between family and health professionals are essential to maintain dignity and reduce distress.

How Can I Provide Comfort and Care at the End of Life for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease?

Providing comfort at the end of life for someone with Alzheimer's disease involves recognizing that verbal abilities are often lost, but emotional and physical awareness may still remain. Soothing activities — like playing familiar music, using gentle touch, and maintaining a calm, well-lit environment — can help reduce anxiety. Even if it's impossible to know whether a person is aware, talking about enjoyable shared memories can be a positive experience.

Practical care includes regular repositioning; keeping the mouth and lips clean, moist, and comfortable; supporting swallowing difficulties; and ensuring that pain relief is given appropriately. Hospice or palliative care professionals can guide families in providing compassionate care tailored to the person's stage and needs, while helping to support caregivers emotionally through this final chapter.

How Can I Provide Comfort and Care at the End of Life for Someone with Dementia?

The general principles of care to provide comfort and dignity apply to a person with any type of dementia, but there may be specific needs relating to dementia of other types. The deterioration in mobility and in motor skills, including swallowing in Parkinson's disease, may be pronounced in a person who is in the final stages of Parkinson's dementia. Personality changes and altered behaviors may further compound difficulties in communicating with, caring for, and comforting a person with frontotemporal or Lewy body dementia. Vascular dementia may be complicated by end-stage strokes, with episodic and more sudden changes toward the end of life, presenting specific challenges of ensuring comfort and appropriate care, especially if an acute event has led to hospitalization.

DID YOU KNOW?

Research has shown that attending a support group just one hour a week can have measurable effects on reducing stress and depression amongst caregivers.

Chapter **11**

Finding the Support You Need as a Caregiver

I don't need to tell you that caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease or dementia can be mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting. It's absolutely essential that you take care of yourself — if not for your own sake, then for your loved one's. You won't be able to give your loved one the support they need if you aren't eating, sleeping, or getting support. In this chapter, I walk you through the resources available for caregivers, including ways that you can manage stress and build resilience. If you're a caregiver, this chapter should come with a flashing neon sign saying, "Read this!"

What Support Resources Are Available for Caregivers?

The resources available to caregivers vary depending on which country or region you live in. Caregivers often find that family, friends, and their local community can provide help and assistance, especially when their loved one is in the early stages of dementia.

Healthcare providers and social workers, alongside charities, offer direct support packages to caregivers. Alternatively, they can issue referrals to specialized volunteer organizations that help with practical needs like shopping and daily tasks. Local libraries and community centers may provide further information, and there may be local events such as regular meetings in your area.

Respite for caregivers can come in many different forms, including opportunities for the person with dementia to be admitted to a residential care home for a few days, or a volunteer who can care for the person at home to give the caregiver time for self-care.

Are There Online Support Groups for Caregivers?

For people who are housebound, live in rural areas, or find it difficult or less comfortable going to an in-person meeting environment,

online forums, including social media communities, can offer support.

As with all online interactions, it's important that appropriate guidance is available for users. Often, there are moderators or professionals linked to larger organizations who can guide discussions to ensure that the experience is safe and helpful to users and that reliable information is being shared.

How Can I Build Resilience as a Caregiver?

Building resilience as a caregiver starts with prioritizing your own well-being. This means making time for rest, healthy eating, and regular physical activity, as well as taking breaks to recharge. Seeking emotional support from friends, family, or a therapist can help you manage stress and maintain perspective. Joining a support group connects you with others who understand the challenges and can offer practical advice.

Learning more about dementia and developing problem-solving skills can increase your confidence in handling difficult situations. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness — it's a crucial step in sustaining compassionate, effective care over time. A resilient caregiver is better equipped to provide the steady, loving support that makes a real difference in the life of someone with dementia.

How Can I Manage Stress as a Caregiver?

Caregiver stress is very common and can have significant effects on your mental *and* physical health. To manage stress, it's important to take regular breaks, get enough rest and time for yourself, and try to maintain your physical activity. Asking for help when needed is especially important, whether from family, friends, your community, or healthcare professionals and social workers. Staying socially connected and making time for hobbies or relaxation can help you remain resilient and maintain your emotional well-being.

Self-care is essential, not selfish, and it's crucial for sustaining your ability to care for someone else.



TIP

If you feel you need more formal help and support through medical care or counseling, seek it out. Talking with a medical professional or therapist can give you the tools you need to stay healthy and continue to be an effective caregiver.

Can Mindfulness or Meditation Help Reduce Caregiver Stress?

Mindfulness and meditation are recognized as effective tools for reducing stress and can help lessen feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, and

frustration that often accompany caregiving for a person with Alzheimer's disease or dementia. Engaging in just a few minutes of deep breathing, quiet reflection, or guided meditation each day can lead to improved mood, lower blood pressure, and a greater sense of emotional balance. Many caregivers report that mindfulness helps them respond to stressful situations more calmly and with greater patience, supporting both their own well-being and the quality of care they provide. By prioritizing these self-care strategies, caregivers can maintain their health and sustain their ability to offer compassionate support over the long term.



TIP

You can find guidance on mindfulness and meditation online or download an app on your smartphone — numerous options are available. If you prefer to practice with other people, you may find classes in your area where you can learn and practice these techniques while care is provided by a family member or friend.

4

Social, Cultural, and Spiritual Considerations

IN THIS PART . . .

This part covers the ways in which Alzheimer's and dementia affect social interactions, how they're seen differently across different cultures, and how spirituality comes into play in caring for someone with the disease. It also touches on the big-picture social challenges of Alzheimer's and dementia — everything from barriers to early diagnosis in minority and rural populations to research challenges and raising awareness.

DID YOU KNOW?

Rates of dementia are rising fastest in low- and middle-income countries where services and support are often hardest to access.

Chapter **12**

Social and Cultural Implications

Alzheimer's disease and dementia have social and cultural implications, ranging from how the person with the disease is seen to how care is given. It's worth considering how society as a whole views these diseases, as well as how you can approach someone with dementia in a culturally sensitive way.

What Are the Social Implications of Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Alzheimer's disease and dementia can lead to significant social impact for the person with dementia and their family. They may face stigma,

misunderstanding, and isolation as symptoms become more visible. Others may be fearful or embarrassed and not know how to respond. Relationships may change as roles shift, and support networks can become strained.

In a broader context, the social implications of the increase in prevalence of these conditions mean that more resources need to be directed toward care and treatment. There are debates about how much social support and societal investment are needed to adequately manage the increasing burden on public health funding.

How Can I Navigate Social Interactions with Someone Who Has Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

Navigating social interactions with someone who has dementia involves patience and understanding. Speak clearly and calmly, maintain eye contact, and allow extra time for responses. Avoid correcting or arguing over memory lapses or confused statements; instead, gently redirecting or simply going with the flow can be more supportive. Focus on shared activities, such as looking at photos, listening to music, or enjoying a walk. Most importantly, be present and kind. Connection, social interaction, and showing how it's possible to have a positive engagement matter more than a perfect conversation.

How Do Different Cultures View Dementia, and How Does That Affect Caregiving Approaches?

Cultural attitudes toward dementia vary widely. In some communities, dementia is accepted as an age-related condition; in others, it is commonly misunderstood or stigmatized. Some communities have traditions of looking after relatives at home, perhaps with the support of a closely connected family structure. In some regions, there is a lack of access to care facilities, so caring for someone at home is a necessity. In other parts of the world, there is much more focus on seeking the latest medical investigations and therapies, even if many of these are limited in their effects.

What Are the Cultural Considerations in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Care?

Culturally respectful care goes beyond language — it involves recognizing how a person's background, faith, customs, and family structure shape their experience with dementia and their expectations of care. Understanding these perspectives in a nonjudgmental way is crucial for providing culturally sensitive care

that respects traditions and family values. No matter the approach, it is important that the aim is always to maintain quality of life, dignity, and comfort. Adapting care to honor these values helps maintain dignity and connection.

How Can I Address Cultural Differences in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Care?

To address cultural differences, it's important to be aware that your own experiences and background may be very different from those of the person with dementia and their caregiver. Inquire sensitively and listen with interest and respect. Ask families about the person's beliefs, preferences, and daily routines. Use interpreters when needed and avoid making assumptions. Healthcare professionals and caregivers can build trust by showing openness, learning about cultural practices, and being flexible in their approach.

DID YOU KNOW?

Many people with dementia continue to recognize and respond to religious rituals, music, prayer, or other cues that have spiritual meaning for them, even when they may no longer be able to speak or communicate clearly.

Chapter **13** **Spiritual Considerations**

Spirituality doesn't end with an Alzheimer's or dementia diagnosis — in fact, it may become an even greater support. When you're caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, you can incorporate spirituality into your care, making sure to draw upon your knowledge and understanding of what the person with the disease finds most helpful. In this chapter, I explain some of the spiritual issues worth considering and offer suggestions for ways to incorporate spiritual practices in your loved one's daily life.

What Are the Spiritual Considerations in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Care?

Spiritual care is a fundamental, though frequently neglected, part of dementia support. Care should be consistent with a person's religious beliefs and traditions where they have been expressed, perhaps during anticipatory care planning.

The concept of spirituality goes beyond religion and is deeply personal, encompassing a person's sense of meaning, identity, connection, and how they may find peace throughout the progression of the disease. A person living with dementia may often continue to experience spirituality through familiar routines, music, prayer, closeness to nature, or quiet reflection, even when verbal communication becomes limited.



TIP

Respecting and nurturing the person's values, beliefs, and past practices can provide a strong sense of comfort and continuity amid uncertainty and loss.

How Can I Address Spiritual Needs in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Care?

You can support the spiritual needs of a person with Alzheimer's disease or dementia by focusing on what has historically brought them comfort, meaning, or joy. They may have expressed these thoughts during care planning, or it may be more intuitive and based on your prior knowledge of the person. It can involve incorporating spiritual or cultural rituals, or playing familiar religious or calming music, or it may take the form of gentle touch, shared silence, or the sight of meaningful symbols such as religious icons, natural scenery, or important references to their past. Simple activities like storytelling, the sharing of the beauty of art, or interacting with a pet can also help maintain a sense of connection and purpose.



TIP

Compassionately and respectfully look for feedback cues from the person with dementia to appreciate if they're finding the experience positive.

DID YOU KNOW?

Research shows that up to 40 percent of dementia cases could be delayed or prevented, but surveys show that less than half of adults are aware of this, believing that developing dementia is inevitable or just a matter of bad luck.

Chapter **14**

Challenges and Awareness

Alzheimer's disease and dementia are extremely challenging for those who have the disease, as well as their friends and family, and this book answers many of the common questions about diagnosing, treating, and living with these diseases. In this final chapter, I walk you through some bigger-picture societal challenges, such as those unique to minority or rural populations, research, and raising awareness. I end with a discussion of possible developments on the horizon.

What Barriers Prevent Early Diagnosis of Dementia in Minority or Rural Populations?

Early diagnosis of dementia in minority and rural populations can be affected by many barriers. These may include limited access to healthcare services and specialists, language differences, lack of awareness or information, and low health literacy. Stigma and misconceptions, such as believing dementia is a normal part of aging or a source of shame, also can prevent or delay people from seeking help. In rural areas, there may be shortages of trained professionals, inadequate diagnostic infrastructure, and long travel distances to clinics, making it harder for people to receive the care they need.

What Are the Common Challenges in Alzheimer's Disease Research?

Alzheimer's disease research faces several challenges, including the following:

- » Understanding its complex, multifactorial causes, which are thought to include genetics and environmental and lifestyle factors

- » Having difficulty testing interventions early enough because the disease process and brain changes tend to begin years before symptoms appear
- » Recruiting diverse participants for studies
- » Securing long-term funding
- » Accurately tracking disease progression

The pharmaceutical industry invests significant sums in Alzheimer's disease research in the hopes of producing disease-modifying drugs that have a very large potential market, but there is less financial incentive in investigating the benefits of making lifestyle and environmental changes that prevent or delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

What Are the Common Challenges in Dementia Research?

Dementia research is complicated by the diversity of different types of dementia with different possible causal factors (for example, vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, and fronto-temporal dementia). Distinguishing between types of dementia can be difficult, especially at its onset, even with advanced testing, so early studies looking at the effects of early interventions can be challenging. Underrepresentation of

minority groups, ethical concerns about studying vulnerable populations, and variable disease progression further complicate research design.

On the other hand, breakthroughs in understanding of other aspects or manifestations of, for example, vascular diseases in general and Parkinson's disease may have relevance in treating the dementias of these types.

What Are the Ethical Dilemmas in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Research?

Ethical dilemmas in dementia research include ensuring that researchers have the person's informed consent, especially because participants may lose decision-making capacity. Research must be designed to protect participants' dignity and to involve family members or carers when needed. Reputable research institutions have ethics committees, which may comprise other independent researchers and lay membership, including representatives of organizations with an interest in the subject area of research. These committees must ensure that agreed ethical standards are met in the design of the research program.

If research is undertaken by pharmaceutical companies with a financial interest in a new drug, they have a responsibility to manage their monetary conflict of interest and an obligation of integrity and honesty regarding possible side effects and any likely limitations in the efficacy of their new product.

How Can I Help Raise Awareness about Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia?

There are many ways you can raise awareness! You can share your personal experiences and show others how a calm, compassionate, and respectful approach to a person with dementia can be very rewarding. Other people may not be aware of the many supporting resources available with a focus on improving quality of life for a person or their care. You can participate in sharing accurate information from reliable sources, dispelling myths, supporting community education, and using social media to promote understanding. Talking openly about dementia, volunteering with dementia organizations, and participating in awareness campaigns or events all help reduce fear and misinformation.

What Are Possible Future Developments in Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia Treatments?

As the critical role of lifestyle factors in preventing, mitigating, or slowing the progression of dementia becomes increasingly clear, substantial investment is needed to educate the public and those with an established diagnosis on adopting healthier ways of living. Unfortunately, funding for these essential preventive and supportive programs remains disproportionately small compared to the vast resources allocated to medical treatments.

Future developments in treatment may include disease-modifying therapies that slow or stop brain changes, personalized management plans based on genetics or *biomarkers* (measurable indicators of the brain changes that signal increased risk or early-stage dementia), and earlier diagnosis using advanced imaging, blood tests, or digital tools. New drugs are being explored to try to slow the progression of dementia and improve quality of life.

Index

A

- acetylcholinesterase inhibitors, 52
- advance care plan, 47
- advocacy
 - for individuals with Alzheimer's disease, 84
 - for individuals with dementia, 85
- Age UK, 59
- agitation, 38
- altered behaviors, 94
- aluminum hypothesis, 34
- Alzheimer's Association, 58, 60
- Alzheimer's disease, 20.
 - See also* dementia
 - advocacy for individuals with, 84
 - aluminum in cookware and antiperspirants, 33–34
 - awareness, raising, 115
 - behavioral changes, 41–42
 - brain, effects on, 24–25
 - caregiving challenges, 70–71
 - causes, 9–10
 - challenges of living with, 38–39
 - clinical trials, questions to ask before enrolling in, 62–63
 - communication challenges, 73–74
 - complementary therapies, 55
 - cultural considerations in care, 105–106
 - cultural differences, addressing, in care, 106
 - daily care needs, managing, 72–73
 - definition, 6
 - diagnosis, 16
 - difference from other types of dementia, 7–8
 - early diagnosis, advantage of, 17–18
 - early signs, 22
 - early stage, 18
 - educating others about, 63
 - emotional impact and coping, 40
 - end-of-life care, providing comfort and care at, 93–94
 - end-of-life considerations, 92
 - ethical considerations in care, 82–83
 - ethical dilemmas in research, 114–115
 - financial planning tools for families, 49–50
 - foods to prevent/delay cognitive decline, 44
 - future treatment developments, 116
 - hereditary factors, 10–11

Alzheimer's disease (*continued*)
 improving communication, 74
 late stage, 19
 latest research developments, 60
 legal and financial considerations, 48–49
 lifestyle changes to reduce risk, 32
 mealtime and eating challenges (mid- to late-stage), 76–77
 medical complications, 88
 medical complications, managing, 89–90
 Mediterranean diet and risk reduction, 30
 middle stage, 18–19
 MIND diet and protection, 31–32
 myths, 13
 navigating social interactions, 104
 nutritional needs, 75
 pain management in late stages of, 91
 participating in research, 61–62
 planning for the future with, 47–48
 prevention, 28–29
 progression over time, 19
 quality of life, maintaining, 69
 research challenges, 112–113
 risk factors, 11–12
 safe environment, creating, 78–79
 safety concerns, 77–78
 social implications, 103–104
 spiritual considerations in care, 108
 spiritual needs, addressing, in care, 109
 stages, 18–19
 staying informed, 58
 staying socially and mentally active (early stage), 43
 support groups, finding and joining, 46–47
 supporting someone with, 68
 symptom management, 40–41
 symptoms, 22–23
 treatment options, 52–53
 trustworthy online sources about, 59–60
 Alzheimer's Society, 60
 American Stroke Association, 59
 amyloid, 7, 9
 amyloid plaques, 24
 anti-amyloid antibodies, 60
 antioxidants, 25, 28
 anxiety, 18, 38
 apathy, 75
 APOE e4 gene variant, 10
 APP, 11
 appetite, 77
 atrophy, 9
 Attendance Allowance, 50
 awareness, raising, about Alzheimer's disease or dementia, 115

B

behavioral changes, 38–39, 77.

See also communication;
personality changes

in Alzheimer's disease, 41–42

in dementia, 42–43

biomarkers, 116

blood tests, 16

blood vessels, 29

brain

and Alzheimer's disease, 6,
19, 24–25

and dementia, 6–7, 25–26

brain-healthy lifestyle, 32

brain scans, 16

brain shrinkage, 24

C

cardiovascular disease,
reducing the risks of, 29

caregivers. *See also* support
resources

building resilience as, 97

managing stress as, 98

mindfulness and meditation
for stress reduction, 98–99

online support groups for,
96–97

caregiving and support

challenges of caregiving, 70–71

daily care needs, managing,
72–73

knowing a person's history in
dementia care, 71–72

maintaining quality of life in
Alzheimer's disease, 69

maintaining quality of life in
dementia, 69–70

supporting someone with
Alzheimer's disease or
dementia, 68

causes of Alzheimer's disease,
9–10

cell death, 24

challenges

of living with Alzheimer's
disease, 38–39

of living with dementia, 39

chemical straightjackets, 52

clinical trials for Alzheimer's
disease or dementia,
questions to ask before
enrolling in, 62–63

cognition, 16

cognitive decline, 24, 78

cognitive therapy, 53

comfort and care, providing,
at end of life

Alzheimer's disease, 93–94
dementia, 94

communication, 38

challenges in Alzheimer's
disease or dementia, 73–74

improvement with individuals
with Alzheimer's disease or
dementia, 74

complementary therapies, 53

for Alzheimer's disease, 55

computed tomography (CT), 16

confusion, 23

coping and emotional support
with Alzheimer's disease or
dementia, 40

cultural considerations

in Alzheimer's disease or
dementia care, 105–106

cultural differences,
addressing, in care, 106

views of different cultures on
dementia, 105

D

daily tasks, independence
in, 68

decision-making, 22, 38,
69, 83, 114

dehydration, 76

dementia. *See also* Alzheimer's
disease

advocacy for individuals
with, 85

awareness, raising, 115

behavioral changes, 42–43

brain, effects on, 25–26

caregiving challenges, 70–71

challenges of living with, 39

clinical trials, questions to ask
before enrolling in, 62–63

communication, improving,
74

communication challenges,
73–74

cultural considerations in
care, 105–106

cultural differences,
addressing, in care, 106

daily care needs, managing,
72–73

definition, 6–7

diagnosis, 16–17

difference from Alzheimer's
disease, 7–8

early diagnosis, advantage of,
17–18

educating others about, 64

emotional impact and
coping, 40

end-of-life care, providing
comfort and care at, 94

end-of-life considerations,
92–93

ethical considerations in care,
83–84

ethical dilemmas in research,
114–115

financial planning tools for
families, 49–50

foods to prevent/delay
cognitive decline, 44

future treatment
developments, 116

hydration (reminding to drink
water), 76

knowing a person's history
for better care, 71–72

latest research developments,
61

legal and financial
considerations, 48–49

lifestyle changes to reduce
risk, 33

medical complications, 88–89

- medical complications, managing, 90
- Mediterranean diet and risk reduction, 30
- MIND diet and protection, 31–32
- minority/rural populations, barriers to early diagnosis in, 112
- music therapy, role of, 45
- myths, 14
- natural/lifestyle-based treatments supporting brain health, 54
- normal aging, difference from, 9
- nutritional needs, 75
- pain management in late stages of, 91
- planning for the future with, 47–48
- prevention, 29
- progression over time, 19–20
- quality of life, maintaining, 69–70
- research, participating in, 62
- research challenges, 113–114
- risk factors, 12–13
- safe environment, creating, 78–79
- safety concerns, 77–78
- social implications, 103–104
- social interactions, navigating, 104
- spiritual considerations in care, 108
- spiritual needs, addressing, in care, 109
- staying informed, 58–59
- support groups, finding and joining, 46–47
- supporting someone with, 68
- symptom management, 40–41
- symptoms, 23–24
- treatment options, 53–54
- trustworthy online sources about, 59–60
- views of different cultures on, 105
- Dementia Alliance International, 59
- Dementia UK, 59
- depression, 38
- diagnosis
 - of Alzheimer's disease, 16
 - of dementia, 16–17
 - early diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or dementia, 17–18
- diagnosis barriers, dementia in minority or rural populations, 112
- diet. *See* lifestyle changes; Mediterranean diet; MIND diet
- Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet, 31
- donepezil, 52
- durable power of attorney, 47

E

- early-onset Alzheimer's disease, 13
- early signs of Alzheimer's disease, 22
- early-stage Alzheimer's disease, 18
 - social and mental activity for, 43
- eating challenges in mid- to late-stage Alzheimer's disease, 76–77
- educating others
 - about Alzheimer's disease, 63
 - about dementia, 64
- emotional difficulties, 38
- empathy, showing, 68
- end-of-life care, providing comfort and care at
 - Alzheimer's disease, 93–94
 - dementia, 94
- end-of-life considerations
 - Alzheimer's disease, 92
 - dementia, 92–93
- ethical considerations
 - in Alzheimer's disease care, 82–83
 - in dementia care, 83–84
- ethical dilemmas, Alzheimer's disease or dementia research, 114–115
- everyday tasks, performing, 23
- extra-virgin olive oil, 30, 31, 32, 75

F

- financial planning tools for families dealing with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, 49–50. *See also* legal and financial planning
- fish, 30
- forgetfulness, 13, 19
- free radicals, 12, 25, 28
- frontotemporal dementia, 8, 26, 39, 43, 58, 61, 70, 89, 94
- fruits, 30, 32, 75
- frustration, 38
- future planning with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, 47–48

G

- galantamine, 52
- genetics, 10
- grief, 38

H

- healthy fats, 75
- herbs, 30
- hereditary factors in Alzheimer's disease, 10–11
- hippocampus, 10
- Huntington's disease, 8
- hydration for dementia patients, 76
- hypertension, 31

I

information and awareness
 staying informed about
 Alzheimer's disease, 58
 staying informed about
 dementia, 58–59
 trustworthy online sources
 about Alzheimer's disease
 or dementia, 59–60
informed consent, 82
in-person meeting
 environment, 96

J

judgment, 22

K

kindness, showing, 68

L

lasting power of attorney. *See*
 durable power of attorney
late-onset Alzheimer's
 disease, 10
late-stage dementia, pain
 management during, 91
late stage of Alzheimer's
 disease, 19
lean proteins, 75
legal and financial planning
 considerations for
 Alzheimer's disease or
 dementia, 48–49
 financial planning tools for
 families, 49–50

legal mechanisms to support
 people with dementia, 49

legumes, 30

Lewy body dementia, 8, 17, 20,
 25–26, 39, 43, 58, 61, 70,
 83, 89, 94

Lewy Body Dementia
 Association, 59

lifestyle changes. *See also* diet;
 physical activity

 reducing the risk of
 Alzheimer's disease, 28, 32
 reducing the risk of
 dementia, 33

loved one's decline,
 witnessing, 71

M

magnetic resonance imaging
 (MRI), 16

mealtime and eating
 challenges in mid- to late-
 stage Alzheimer's disease,
 76–77

meaningful activities, 68

Medicaid, 50

medical complications
 in Alzheimer's disease, 88
 in dementia, 88–89

medical complications,
 management of
 in Alzheimer's disease, 89–90
 in dementia, 90

meditation for caregiver stress
 reduction, 98–99

- Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay diet. *See* MIND diet
- Mediterranean diet, 75
 - and Alzheimer's disease, 30
 - and dementia, 30
 - vs. MIND diet, 31–32
- Mediterranean-style diet rich, 32
- Memantine, 52
- memory aids, using, 69
- memory loss, 13, 22
- mental stimulation, 32
- middle stage of Alzheimer's disease, 18–19
- MIND diet, 31–32, 44, 54, 75
 - and Alzheimer's disease, 31–32
 - and dementia, 31–32
 - vs. Mediterranean diet, 31–32
- mindfulness for caregiver stress reduction, 98–99
- Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE), 16
- mixed dementia, 8, 26
- monoclonal antibodies, 52
- mood changes, 23
- morphine, 91
- music therapy, improving quality of life in dementia, 45
- myths
 - about Alzheimer's disease, 13
 - about dementia, 14

N

- National Institute on Aging (NIA), 58, 60
- natural and lifestyle-based treatments supporting brain health in dementia, 54
- neurofibrillary tangles, 10
- nonverbal cues, 73, 74
- normal aging, dementia and, 9
- nutrition and hydration
 - hydration for dementia patients, 76
 - mealtime and eating challenges in mid- to late-stage Alzheimer's disease, 76–77
- nutritional needs in Alzheimer's disease or dementia, 75
- nuts, 30, 32

O

- online support groups for caregivers, 96–97
- oxidative stress, 12, 25, 28, 32

P

- pain management, in late-stage Alzheimer's disease or dementia, 91
- Parkinson's dementia, 43, 61, 89, 94
- Parkinson's disease, 8, 33, 94
- Parkinson's UK, 59

- personality changes, 94
- personality shifts, 23
- physical activity, 32, 41, 97, 98
- physical symptoms, 23
- polyphenols, 30, 44
- prevention
 - of Alzheimer's disease, 28–29
 - of dementia, 29
- prion diseases, 8
- problem-solving, 38
- processed foods, 30
- progression
 - of Alzheimer's disease, 19
 - of dementia, 19–20
- PSEN1, 11
- PSEN2, 11
- psychological difficulties, 38

R

- red meat, 30
- research
 - challenges in Alzheimer's disease, 112–113
 - challenges in dementia, 113–114
 - ethical dilemmas in Alzheimer's disease or dementia research, 114–115
- research and clinical trials
 - clinical trials, questions to ask before enrolling in, 62–63
 - participating in Alzheimer's disease research, 61–62
 - participating in dementia research, 62

- research developments, latest
 - in Alzheimer's disease, 60
 - in dementia, 61
- resilience, building, as caregiver, 97
- risk factors
 - for Alzheimer's disease, 11–12
 - for dementia, 12–13
- rivastigmine, 52

S

- safety and environment
 - creating safe environment, 78–79
 - safety concerns in Alzheimer's disease or dementia, 77–78
- self-awareness, 70
- self-care, 98
- sleep disturbances, 39
- social and mental activity, early-stage Alzheimer's disease, 43
- social implications
 - of Alzheimer's disease, 103–104
 - of dementia, 103–104
- social interactions, 68
 - navigating with individuals with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, 104
- social services, 50
- spices, 30
- spinal fluid analysis, 16

- spiritual considerations,
 - in Alzheimer's disease or dementia care, 108. *See also* cultural considerations; ethical considerations
- spiritual needs, addressing, in Alzheimer's disease or dementia care, 109
- stages of Alzheimer's disease, 18–19
- stress management
 - as caregiver, 98
 - mindfulness or meditation for caregiver stress, 98–99
- Stroke Association, 59
- support groups
 - benefits of joining, 46
 - finding and joining for Alzheimer's disease or dementia, 46–47
- support resources
 - for caregivers, 96
 - online support groups, 96–97
- symptom management in Alzheimer's disease or dementia, 40–41
- symptoms
 - of Alzheimer's disease, 22–23
 - of dementia, 23–24

T

- tau, 7, 9
- tau tangles, 24
- thinking ability, 70
- Tip icon, 2
- treatment options. *See also* complementary therapies; prevention; research
 - for Alzheimer's disease, 52–53
 - for dementia, 53–54
- treatments of Alzheimer's disease or dementia, future developments in, 116

V

- vascular dementia, 8, 12, 17, 20, 25, 32, 33, 39, 42, 53, 58, 61, 94
 - prevention of, 29
- vegetables, 30, 32, 75
- verbal communication, 73

W

- wandering, 39
- whole grains, 30, 32, 75

About the Author

Simon Poole, MD, has been a primary care physician in Cambridge, England, for more than 30 years, with a particular interest in public health, lifestyle medicine, and nutrition, as well as the management of long-term medical conditions, including Alzheimer's disease and dementia. He has taught and undertaken research with Cambridge University and is a founding member of the British and European Associations of Lifestyle Medicine. Simon is a council member of the U.S. True Health Initiative and an International Senior Collaborator with the Global Centre for Nutrition and Health in Cambridge. He was awarded Fellowship of the British Medical Association for services to the profession in 2018, which included long-standing membership in the Council of the Royal College of General Practitioners and Public Health Medicine Committee. Simon is a recognized international authority and speaker on lifestyle medicine, chairing the Food Values Conference series at the Pontifical Academy of Science of the Vatican, and the author of award-winning medical, nutrition, and lifestyle books.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those families and friends who care for and support those they hold dear with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, often in very challenging circumstances, with particular personal thoughts of the much-loved Anne Bates and all her family. I also dedicate the book to the residents and dedicated staff of Etheldred House, Cambridge, who taught me so much about how to care for and communicate with patients and their families.

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