



Common Alzheimer's & Medical Terms

Acetylcholine

A chemical in the brain (neurotransmitter) that appears to be involved in learning and memory – Acetylcholine is greatly diminished in the brains of people with Alzheimer's disease.

Activities of daily living (ADLs)

Personal care activities necessary for everyday living, such as eating, bathing, grooming, dressing and using the toilet.

Acute care

This is a medical setting such as a hospital, intensive care unit, or emergency department.

Adult day services

Programs that provide participants with opportunities to interact with others, usually in a community center or dedicated facility.

Advance directive (living will)

A document written when in "good" health that informs your family and health care providers of your wishes for extended medical treatment in times of emergency.

Adverse reaction

A clinical trial term that includes any unexpected health or behavioral changes in the person participating in the trial.

Aggression

Hitting, pushing or threatening conduct that commonly occurs when the person with Alzheimer's disease becomes scared, nervous or unsure why something is being done to them.

Agitation

Agitation can be displayed as screaming, shouting, complaining, moaning, cursing, pacing, fidgeting, or wandering. This often occurs when the person with Alzheimer's disease is unable to express themselves when something is bothering them or they are scared and afraid.

Alzheimer's disease

A progressive disease in which nerve cells in the brain degenerate and brain matter shrinks, resulting in impaired thinking, behavior and memory.

**Ambulation**

The ability to walk and move about freely.

Amyloid

A protein deposited in plaques in Alzheimer's disease brains.

Amyloid plaque

Abnormal clusters of dead and dying nerve cells, other brain cells, and amyloid protein fragments, characteristic of the brains of people with Alzheimer's disease.

Antidepressants

Medications used to treat depression. Antidepressants are not addictive; they do not make you "high," have a tranquilizing effect or produce a craving for more. They can cause drowsiness and other side effects.

Anti-inflammatory drugs

Drugs that reduce inflammation by modifying the body's immune response.

Anxiety

A feeling of apprehension, fear, nervousness or dread accompanied by restlessness or tension.

Apathy

Lack of interest, concern or emotion.

Aphasia

Difficulty understanding the speech of others and/or expressing oneself verbally.

Assessment

An evaluation, usually performed by a physician, of a person's mental, emotional and social capabilities.

Assisted living

A residential care setting that combines housing, support services and health care for people in the early or middle stages of a disabling disease, such as Alzheimer's disease. Typically, there is a 24-hour staff, activities, meals, housekeeping, laundry, and transportation. Definitions of assisted living and regulations differ state to state.

Assistive device

An aid, such as eyeglasses, a cane, a wheelchair, or a hearing aid.

**Atrophy**

Shrinking in size; can be used to describe loss of muscle mass and function, as well as the loss of brain tissue seen in Alzheimer's disease on brain imaging.

Audiologist

An audiologist deals with ear problems, including hearing loss, tinnitus (ringing in the ears) and lack of balance.

Autonomy

A person's ability to make independent choices.

Behavioral neurologist

A doctor who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of behavioral and memory disorders that are due to brain disease.

Behavioral symptoms

Many healthcare professionals will use the term "behaviors" when referring to agitation, aggression, wandering and other actions. However, the Gayle Wells Foundation views these displays as expressions due to needs that are not being met for the person with Alzheimer's disease.

Beneficiary

An individual named in a will who is designated to receive all or part of an estate upon the death of the person who made the will.

Brain

With the spinal cord, one of two parts making up the central nervous system. The brain is the center of thought and emotion. It is responsible for the coordination and control of bodily activities and the interpretation of information from the senses.

Care planning

A written action plan containing strategies for delivering care that addresses an individual's specific needs or problems.

Case management

Care and services planned by health care workers.

Catheter

A bendable plastic tube that goes into the bladder to help a person urinate.

**Central nervous system (CNS)**

One of the two major divisions—with the peripheral nervous system—of the nervous system. Composed of the brain and spinal cord, the CNS is the control network for the entire body.

Cerebral cortex

The outer layer of the brain, consisting of nerve cells and the pathways that connect them. The cerebral cortex is the part of the brain in which thought processes take place. In Alzheimer's disease, nerve cells in the cerebral cortex degenerate and die.

Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF)

The fluid that fills the areas surrounding the brain and spinal cord.

Chest X-ray (CXR, chest film)

Using a very small amount of radiation to produce an image of the structures of the chest (heart, lungs and bones) on film.

Choline

A brain transmitter that allows cells to communicate with each other.

Clinical trial

An organized research program conducted with patients to evaluate a new medical treatment, drug or device.

Co-existing illness

A medical condition that exists simultaneously with another, such as arthritis and dementia.

Cognitive abilities

Mental abilities, such as judgment, memory, learning, comprehension and reasoning.

Cognitive symptoms

In Alzheimer's disease, the symptoms that relate to loss of thought processes, such as learning, comprehension, memory, reasoning and judgment.

Competence

A person's ability to make informed choices.



Computed axial tomography (CAT or CT scan)

A technique in which multiple X-rays of the body are taken from different angles in a very short period of time. These images are collected by a computer to give a series of cross-sectional "slices" of the body. In diagnosing dementia, CT scans can reveal tumors and small strokes in the brain.

Continuum of care

Care services available to assist individuals throughout the course of a disease.

Contractures

Contractures are shortening of tendons and muscles and can make arms, knees, feet, and hands curl up. Physical therapy may help in treating this condition. It is not uncommon for contractures to be permanent due to stroke or dementia.

Cueing

The process of providing cues, prompts, hints and other meaningful information, direction or instruction—such as adding labels to drawers—to aid a person who is experiencing memory loss.

Daily plan

Provides structure for the person with Alzheimer's disease. A daily plan includes activities that the individual enjoys.

Decubitus ulcers (pressure sores or bedsores)

Skin sores caused by constant pressure.

Delusion

A false idea that is firmly believed and strongly maintained in spite of proof or evidence to the contrary.

Dementia

The loss of mental functions—such as thinking, memory and reasoning—severely enough to interfere with a person's daily functioning. Dementia is not a disease itself, but rather a group of symptoms that may accompany certain disease or conditions. Symptoms also may include changes in personality, mood and behavior. Dementia is irreversible when caused by disease or injury, but may be reversible when caused by drugs, alcohol, hormone or vitamin imbalances, or depression. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia.



Dementia-specific

Services that are provided specifically for people with dementia.

Depression

A clinical mood disorder that prevents a person from leading a normal life. Types of depression include: major depression, bipolar depression, chronic low-grade depression (dysthymia) and seasonal depression (Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD).

Diagnosis

The process by which a doctor determines what disease a patient has by studying the patient's symptoms and medical history, and analyzing any tests performed (blood tests, urine tests, brain scans, etc.).

Differential diagnosis

The clinical evaluation of possible causes of dementia to rule out all other factors before settling on Alzheimer's disease as a diagnosis.

Disorientation

A cognitive disability in which the senses of time, direction and recognition become difficult to distinguish.

Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) Order

This document is based upon a patient's wishes and instructs medical personnel to not perform life-saving measure once they have stopped breathing. Life-saving measures can include CPR or other procedures that would restart the heart or breathing, fluids for hydration, and feeding tubes. The DNR must be signed by a physician and placed in the patient's chart/medical record.

Durable power of attorney

A legal document that allows an individual an opportunity to authorize another person, usually a trusted family member or friend, to make legal decisions when the person is no longer able to make legal decisions for himself or herself.

Durable power of attorney for health care

A legal document that allows an individual to appoint another person to make all decisions regarding health care, including choices regarding health care providers, medical treatment and, in later stages of the disease, end-of-life decisions.

Dysphasia

The inability to find the right word or understand the meaning of a word.



Early-onset Alzheimer's disease

A form of Alzheimer's disease in which individuals are diagnosed with the disease before age 65. Early-onset Alzheimer's disease sometimes is associated with mutations in genes located on chromosomes 1, 14 and 21.

Early stage

The beginning stages of Alzheimer's disease when an individual experiences very mild to moderate cognitive impairments.

Elder law attorney

An elder law attorney handles general estate planning issues and can provide guidance for planning for the future. Elder law attorneys can also assist clients in planning for long-term care and medical needs.

Electrocardiogram (ECG)

A recording of the electrical activity of the heart.

Electroencephalogram (EEG)

A procedure that measures the amount and type of brain wave activity using electrodes placed on the surface of the scalp.

Environment

The physical and interpersonal surroundings that can affect mood and behavior in people with dementia.

Executor

The person named in a will who manages the estate of the deceased individual.

Familial Alzheimer's disease

A form of Alzheimer's disease that runs in families.

Family/caregiver/designated representative

"Family members" can include people who are important to the individual, regardless of whether they are related

Feeding tube

A feeding tube is a plastic or rubber tube to give food and water to someone who cannot eat or drink. A feeding tube can be put in through the nose (nasogastric) or the stomach wall (PEG tube).

**Financial planner**

A financial planner can assist the client with making decisions to make the most of their financial resources.

Free-standing, dementia-specific care center

A facility solely dedicated to the care of people with dementia. These facilities may also be referred to as memory care facilities.

Functional capabilities

What a person is able to do, such as activities of daily living.

Functional impairment

Difficulty or Inability to dress, use the toilet, eat, bathe, or walk without help.

Gait

Term that identifies the way a person walks. People in the later stages of Alzheimer's disease often have a "magnetic gait," which means their ability to lift their feet as they walk has diminished.

Genetic counseling

A process in which a genetic counselor obtains a complete family and personal medical history in order to determine the probable existence of a genetic problem occurring and reoccurring within a family.

Genetic testing

Certain tests that are ordered by a physician specializing in genetics so that the presence of genetic abnormalities may be discovered. For patients and families suspected of having an inherited disease, it may be possible to find the mutation causing the disease through genetic testing of blood.

Geriatrician

A doctor who specializes in the medical care and treatment of older adults.

Geri chair

A geri chair is a high-backed cushioned recliner with a leg and foot rest. The staff can push it on wheels, but the resident cannot move it. A geri chair is a restraint, so it can be used only on a physician's order. A geri chair is often ordered once the individual with Alzheimer's has a high risk of falling because they can no longer walk on their own.

Guardian/conservator

An individual appointed by the courts who is authorized to make legal and financial decisions for another person.

**Hallucination**

A sensory experience in which a person can see, hear, smell, taste or feel something that is not there.

Hippocampus

A part of the brain that is important for learning and memory.

Hoarding

Collecting and putting things away in a guarded manner.

Home health aides

Individuals who provide non-medical health care to people at home. Training or certification requirements vary from state-to-state, but typical services include assistance with activities of daily living, managing medications and some household tasks

Hospice

A program that offers support and provides comfort and care at life's end, allowing dying persons to live as fully and comfortably as they can.

Immune system

The body's natural defense system against infection or disease; a system of cells that protects the body from bacteria, viruses, toxins and other foreign substances.

Incontinence

Loss of bladder and/or bowel control.

In-home care

These care services involve professionals coming to the home to help the caregiver and the person with dementia. Services vary in type and can include companion services, personal care services and homemaker services.

Inflammatory response

The immune system's normal response to tissue injury or abnormal stimulation caused by a physical, chemical or biological substance.

Instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs)

Complex activities (different from basic ADLs, such as eating, dressing and bathing) important to daily living, such as cooking, writing and driving.

**Late-onset Alzheimer's disease**

The most common form of Alzheimer's disease, usually occurring after age 65. Late-onset Alzheimer's disease affects almost half of all people over the age of 85 and may or may not be hereditary.

Late stage

Designation given when dementia symptoms have progressed to the extent that a person has little capacity for self-care.

Layering

Behavior that involves inappropriately changing or layering clothing on top of one another.

Living trust

A legal document that allows an individual (the grantor or trustor) to create a trust and appoint someone else as trustee (usually a trusted individual or financial institution) to carefully invest and manage his or her assets

Living will

A legal document that expresses an individual's decision on the use of artificial life support systems.

Long-term care

A comprehensive range of medical, personal and social services coordinated to meet the physical, social and emotional needs of people who are chronically ill or disabled.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)

A test that produces high-quality images of the body's internal structures without the use of X-rays. MRI uses a large magnet, radio waves and a computer to produce these images.

Medicaid

A program sponsored by the federal government and administered by states that is intended to provide health care and health-related services to low-income individuals.

Medicare

A federal health insurance program for people age 65 and older, and for individuals with disabilities.

Memory

The ability to process information that requires attention, storage and retrieval.



Metabolism

The complex chemical and physical processes of living organisms that promote growth, sustain life and enable other bodily functions to take place.

Mild cognitive impairment (MCI)

A memory problem that is noticeable to others. People with MCI may have other problems in brain function as well, but they are able to get through the day and do what they need to do without major difficulty. Some (not all) people with MCI progress to develop Alzheimer's disease.

Mini-Mental State Examination

A mental status exam commonly used to measure a person's basic cognitive skills, such as short-term memory, long-term memory, orientation, writing and language.

Music therapy

Use of music to improve physical, psychological, cognitive and social functioning.

Neurofibrillary tangle

An accumulation of twisted protein (tau protein) fragments inside nerve cells. Neurofibrillary tangles are one of the characteristic structural abnormalities found in the brains of people with Alzheimer's disease. Upon autopsy, the presence of amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles is used to positively diagnose Alzheimer's disease.

Neurological disorder

A disturbance in structure or function of the nervous system resulting from developmental abnormality, disease, injury or toxin.

Neurologist

A doctor who is specially trained to diagnose and treat disorders of the nervous system.

Neuropathology

Changes in the brain produced by a disease.

Neuropsychological testing

The evaluation of brain function and an individual's capabilities that utilizes tests to assess language, visual-perceptual skills, memory, attention, problem-solving and reasoning.

Neuropsychologist

An individual who holds a doctoral degree (PhD) in clinical psychology or a related discipline and who specializes in the evaluation and management of brain dysfunction.

**Neurotransmission**

The passage of signals from one nerve cell to another via chemical substances or electrical signals.

Neurotransmitter

A special chemical in the brain that is necessary for communication between nerve cells. Examples of neurotransmitters include acetylcholine, dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin.

Nurse practitioners (NPs) and physician assistants (PAs)

Nurse practitioners (NPs) and physician assistants (PAs) are specially trained and may help oversee residents' care. In many states, doctor-supervised NPs and PAs write orders for treatment and medication.

Occupational therapists (OT)

An occupational therapist helps individuals change their activities or environment so they can eat, dress and bathe. An OT may also help with other tasks, such as cooking, taking medication or driving. They can also guide family members and caregivers on how to assist their loved one.

Ombudsman

An ombudsman in a long-term care facility helps residents and their families keep their rights and resolve complaints

Onset

Defines the time when a disease begins (early-onset, late-onset).

Pacing

Aimless wandering or walking back and forth, often triggered by an internal stimulus—such as pain, hunger or boredom—or by some distraction in the environment—such as noise, smell or temperature.

Palliative care

Palliative care includes medical or surgical methods to ease the pain of a serious or incurable illness

Paranoia

Suspicion of others that is not based on fact.

Parkinson's disease

A progressive, neurodegenerative disease with an unknown cause characterized by the death of nerve cells in a specific area of the brain. People with Parkinson's disease lack the neurotransmitter dopamine and have symptoms such as tremors, speech impediments, movement difficulties and often dementia later in the course of the disease.

Peripheral nervous system (PNS)

One of the two major divisions of the nervous system. Nerves in the PNS connect the central nervous system with sensory organs, other organs, muscles, blood vessels and glands.

Perseveration

The persistent repetition of an activity, word, phrase or movement, such as tapping, wiping and picking.

Personal care

Activities such as grooming, bathing, and dressing.

PET scan (positron emission tomography scan)

An imaging scan that measures the activity of the functional level of the brain by measuring its use of glucose, or reveals molecular abnormalities such as the amyloid protein.

Personal health record

A personal health record (PHR) is a regularly updated collection of important health information. If you have dementia or are caring for someone with dementia, a PHR will help you work with your care team.

Pharmacology

The study of drugs, including their composition, production, uses and effects in the body.

Physical therapist

A physical therapist treats physical disabilities and works with residents to improve general fitness. A physical therapist may also teach a resident how to use a walker, artificial limb or wheelchair.

Placebo

An inactive material in the same form as an active drug; for example, a sugar pill (See double-blind, placebo-controlled study).

**Plaques and tangles**

See amyloid plaque and neurofibrillary tangle.

Power of attorney

A power of attorney is a legal form that names someone to act as your substitute.

Prognosis

The probable outcome or course of a disease; the chance of recovery.

Progressive disorder

A disorder that gets worse over time.

Psychiatrists

Doctors who specialize in treating mental, emotional or behavioral disorders. They are doctors who can prescribe medications.

Psychologists

Specialists who concentrate on the science of the mind and behavior. Psychologists usually have advanced degrees and receive additional training to work with patients. Psychologists are not medical doctors and cannot prescribe medication, but do perform evaluations and use psychotherapy. They also are referred to as clinical psychologists.

Psychosis

A general term for a state of mind in which thinking becomes irrational and/or disturbed. Psychosis refers primarily to delusions, hallucinations and other severe thought disturbances.

Psychotherapy

A variety of techniques used to treat depression. Psychotherapy involves talking to a licensed professional who helps the depressed person. Psychotherapy has proven to be effective in treating mild and moderate forms of depression, and can be combined with drug therapy to treat all degrees of depression.

Quality of care

A term used to describe care and services that allow the recipients to attain and maintain their highest level of mental, physical and psychological function in a dignified and caring way.

Reassurance

Encouragement intended to relieve tension, fear and confusion that can result from dementia.

**Receptor**

A site on a nerve cell that receives a specific neurotransmitter; the message receiver.

Reinforcement

The use of praise, repetition and stimulation of the senses to influence a person's behavior.

Related disorders

Conditions that are similar in nature to the main condition but occur for a different reason.

Reminiscence

A life review activity aimed at surfacing and reviewing positive memories and experiences.

Repetitive behavior

Repeated questions, stories and outbursts or specific activities done over and over again, common in people with dementia.

Respite

A short break or time away.

Respite care

Services that provide people with temporary relief from the tasks associated with care giving. Examples of respite care include in-home assistance, short nursing home stays, and adult day care.

Risk factor

A factor that increases a person's chance of developing a disease or predisposes a person to a certain condition.

Safe Return

The Alzheimer's Association's nationwide identification, support, and registration program that assists in the safe return of individuals with Alzheimer's disease or other dementias who wander and become lost.

**Sensory-motor**

Aspects of sensation and movement.

Shadowing

Following, mimicking and interrupting behaviors that people with dementia may exhibit.

Side effect

An undesired effect of a drug treatment that may range from barely noticeable to uncomfortable to dangerous. Side effects usually are predictable.

Skilled nursing care

A level of care that includes ongoing medical or nursing services.

Social worker

An individual who has specialized training in identifying and accessing community resources—such as adult daycare, home care or nursing home services—as well as in individual and group counseling.

Special care unit

A designated area of a residential care facility or nursing home that cares specifically for the needs of people with Alzheimer's disease.

Sundowning

Unsettled behavior evident in the late afternoon or early evening.

Support group

A facilitated gathering of patients, caregivers, family, friends or others affected by a disease or condition for the purpose of discussing issues related to the disease.

Suspiciousness

A mistrust common in Alzheimer patients as their memory becomes progressively worse. An example is when patients believe their belongings have been stolen.

Tangles

See neurofibrillary tangles.

Toxin

A substance that can cause illness, injury or death. Toxins are produced by living organisms.

Trigger

An environmental or personal stimulus that sets off a particular display of frustration..



Wandering

Occurs when the person with Alzheimer's disease to leave their current location and become lost in familiar surroundings.

Will

A legal document created by an individual that names an executor (the person who will manage the estate) and beneficiaries (persons who will receive the estate at the time of the individual's death).