

Caring for a Family Member with Dementia

Are behavior problems common in people with dementia?

Yes. Many patients with dementia—the name for an illness like Alzheimer’s disease—have behavior problems, such as shouting, agitation (being upset, frustrated and confused) and disturbed sleep. Wandering away and resisting care are other common problems. People with Alzheimer’s disease may have strange thoughts, or they may imagine they hear or see things that are very upsetting to them (hallucinations).

Why do people with dementia become irritable and agitated?

The agitation can have many causes. Frustrating situations can cause people with dementia to become agitated. For example, a person with dementia may become agitated if he or she can’t get dressed, gives the wrong answer to a question or is challenged about his or her confusion or inability to do things. As a result, the person may cry, become irritable or try to hit, kick or hurt you in some way.

If the agitation has no obvious cause (such as a sudden change in surroundings or a frustrating situation), or if a person in your family becomes agitated very suddenly, he or she should be seen by a doctor. The sudden occurrence of agitation may be caused by infection, illness or injury, or by a medicine.

How can I deal with the agitation in my relative with dementia?

Even if the agitation is a chronic problem, there are ways of dealing with it. One of the most important things you can do is avoid situations in which your loved one might fail to remember something or forget to do something and become frustrated. You can try to have your loved one do the less difficult tasks. For example, instead of expecting your wife to get dressed all by herself, you can have her put on one thing by herself, such as a jacket.

You can also try to limit the number of difficult situations the person must face. For example, showers can be taken every other day instead of every day. Also, you can schedule difficult activities for a time of day when your loved one tends to be less agitated. It’s helpful to give frequent reassurance and avoid contradicting him or her.

What should I do if hallucinations are a problem?

If hallucinations are not making your loved one scared or anxious, you do not need to do anything. It's better not to confront people about hallucinations, because you will not be able to convince them that there are no voices or people, and arguing may just be upsetting.

If the hallucinations are scary, you can try to distract the person by getting him or her involved in a pleasant activity. If distracting the person doesn't work and the hallucinations continue, your doctor may want to prescribe some medicine to help. This medicine will not get rid of the hallucinations, but your loved one will be less upset by them.

What if my relative will not go to sleep at night?

First, try to make the person more aware of what time of day it is. You can have clocks placed where he or she can see them. You can keep curtains open so that he or she can tell when it is daytime and when it is nighttime.

Limit his or her consumption of chocolate, cola beverages, coffee and tea, since these substances contain caffeine and may keep him or her awake. Try to help your loved one get some exercise every day, and don't let him or her take too many naps during the day. Be certain that the bedroom is peaceful, since it is easier to sleep in a quiet room. If your family member has arthritis or another painful condition, ask your doctor if it is okay to give a medicine for pain right before bed, so pain will not interrupt sleep.

What if wandering becomes a problem?

Medicine usually does not help prevent wandering. Sometimes, however, very simple things can help with this problem. It is all right for your loved one to wander in a safe place, such as in a fenced yard. By providing such a safe place, you may avoid a confrontation. If this doesn't work, a stop sign placed on the door or a piece of furniture placed in front of the door may remind your loved one not to go out that particular door. A ribbon tied across a door can serve as a similar reminder. Hiding the doorknob by placing a strip of cloth over it may also be helpful.

An alarm system (even just a few empty cans tied to a string on the doorknob) will alert you that your loved one is trying to leave a certain area. You might even have to place special locks on the doors, but be aware that such locks might be dangerous if a house fire occurs. Some people with dementia can open certain types of locks.

**Where can I
get more
information?**

The Alzheimer's Association provides support and assistance to people with dementia and their families. The Alzheimer's Association can be contacted by telephone, 800-621-0379, or by mail, 70 E. Lake St., Suite 600, Chicago, IL 60601.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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