




KENDAL<sup>®</sup> *at Home*  
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# Dementia, Alzheimer's & Protecting Your Cognitive Health

BRAIN HEALTH AS YOU AGE





On her way home from work, Jane finds herself driving on an unfamiliar street. She searches for a landmark — a restaurant she frequents for breakfast on Sundays — anything to help orient herself.

Then she sees it. A familiar street sign. Relieved, Jane turns onto the street and soon arrives home.

She walks in the door, and says nothing to her partner, brushing off the experience and attributing it to a poor night's sleep.

A few days later, Jane's working hard to assemble a new bookcase. But she finds the instruction sheet too confusing.

Regardless of our age, we have all experienced Jane's frustrations — getting lost, forgetting something or feeling baffled by instructions — at one time or another. And if you're like most older adults, you probably have wondered whether what you're experiencing is normal or if it could be a sign of dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

In this guide, we'll explore the signs of cognitive decline, the differences between Alzheimer's disease and dementia and how to maintain cognitive health.

# The Differences Between Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease

Read or watch anything about brain health and you probably have seen Alzheimer's disease and dementia used interchangeably. They are not the same.

Though Alzheimer's disease is the biggest cause of dementia, there are some reversible causes of dementia. These include:

- Medication side effects
- Nutritional deficiencies and dehydration
- Depression
- Hypothyroidism or hypoglycemia
- Infections like meningitis or encephalitis as well as untreated syphilis and Lyme disease

In addition to Alzheimer's disease, other non-reversible, progressive forms of dementia include:

- Vascular dementia
- Parkinson's disease
- Frontal temporal dementia
- Lewy body dementia
- Traumatic brain injury
- Chronic alcoholism
- Brain tumors



Dementia is not a disease, but a set of symptoms used to describe brain disorders that cause loss of intellectual abilities like language or memory, judgment, calculation, abstract reasoning and behavior.

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Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia — responsible for **60 to 80 percent of cases**, which is why the terms are often used interchangeably.



## Early Stage

Early signs of dementia are usually mild and gradual. Common signs include forgetfulness, losing track of time and becoming lost in familiar settings. Often, these signs are overlooked or falsely dismissed as normal parts of aging.

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*“A misconception is that people who are aging are expected to have memory loss. That’s definitely a myth. Often, an adult child will notice a parent having episodes of memory loss, but be afraid to discuss it with their parent. It is not unusual for the parent to try and cover up memory difficulties because it can be scary or embarrassing. It is very important to talk to your loved one, have an open discussion about it and make an appointment with the primary care physician.”*

— Jennifer Brush, M.A., CCC-SLP, Director of Healthcare Research and Education at the Brush Development Co.





## Middle Stage

As dementia progresses to the middle stage, signs become more clear and restricting. A person with dementia will forget recent events and people's names and faces. He or she may experience behavior changes, including wandering and repeated questioning, and his or her personal hygiene may decline.

# Stages of Dementia



## Late Stage

The late stage of dementia is one of near total dependence and inactivity. Memory disturbances are serious. A person will often be unaware of time and place and will have difficulty recognizing relatives and friends. The physical tolls of dementia also become more obvious.

A person will often have difficulty walking and experience behavior changes (such as aggression) that may escalate.



# Protecting Your Brain Health

There is no treatment currently available to cure any of the diseases that cause dementia or to alter its progressive course. However, every individual can take steps throughout his or her lifetime to sharpen the mind.

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## *Learn New Skills*

Learning a challenging new activity can strengthen the connections between parts of your brain. In a recent study, Dr. Denise Park, a neuroscientist at the University of Texas at Dallas, randomly assigned 200 older adults to spend 15 hours a week for three months learning either quilting or digital photography. Compared to a “social group” that watched movies or reminisced about past vacations and a group that worked quietly at home listening to the radio or playing easy games and puzzles, the groups challenged to learn a new skill experienced significant gains in memory. One year later, they had retained their improved memory function.

## *Exercise*

You know regular exercise can benefit your heart health, waistline and immune system, but physical activity can benefit your cognitive health as well. Researchers at the University of British Columbia found that regular aerobic exercise — the kind that makes you work up a sweat — boosts the size of your hippocampus, the area of the brain involved in memory and learning. Conversely, while physically beneficial, balance, resistance and muscle training exercises did not have the same effect.

## *Relax and Sleep Well*

Mindful relaxation, a stress management technique that focuses on breathing to calm the body, can help reduce negative health effects of stress on your body and mind. In a Harvard study, adults who practiced mindful stress reduction for eight weeks exhibited a significant increase in the density of gray matter in the hippocampus.



### Try these activities:

- Go for a brisk one-hour walk
- Swim
- Take the stairs
- Play tennis or squash
- Go dancing
- Rake leaves or do yard work
- Housework like floor mopping or vacuuming



*“When you worry, you take away from your experience today, and you take away from your quality of life today. Taking advantage of being mindful about living in the present and making the most of what you have for today is very helpful,” says Brush, of Brush Development.*

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Consistently getting a good night’s rest is another way to keep your brain sharp. “Some recent research shows sticking to a regular sleep schedule, limiting caffeine and alcohol right before you go to bed, and getting adequate sleep in regular patterns is important,” Brush says. Most adults need seven or eight hours of sleep each night.

## *Consume a Healthy Diet*

What you eat affects more than your waistline. You may also know certain foods have been shown to enhance brain function, improve mental performance or decrease the risk of memory loss.

The [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#) recommends including the following in your diet:

- Vegetables, especially broccoli, cabbage and dark leafy greens
- Dark berries like blackberries, blueberries and cherries
- Omega-3 fatty acids like salmon, bluefish tuna, sardines, herring
- Walnuts. Try adding them to a salad, oatmeal or just eating them as a snack

## *Socialize and be Creative*

University of Michigan researchers found that just [10 minutes of social interaction](#) improved cognitive performance. Pursuing artistic activities like painting, drawing and sculpting can have benefits as well. Researchers found that [73 percent of middle and older aged people](#) who participated in activities like those above were less likely to have memory or thinking problems.



# How to Improve Your Memory

If you want to improve your memory for a specific piece of information, routine or behavior — like taking medication or keeping a daily schedule — Brush advises trying a memory intervention technique called Spaced Retrieval.

*“When you just tell someone information, it’s not a very effective way of helping them learn. However, when people are told the information, and then they practice recalling the information, the practice of recall strengthens the neural networks in your brain, and it’s more likely that you will remember the information.”*

— Jennifer Brush, M.A., CCC-SLP,  
Director of Healthcare Research and Education at the Brush Development Co.

Many people who are living with memory loss can learn and remember information, including facts and tasks. We can help individuals to learn and remember information by changing the way we teach the information, Brush says. Telling someone the same thing repeatedly is not as effective as having the person practice at remembering the correct response.

Spaced Retrieval can be used to help a person with memory loss remember information over longer periods of time until the person can recall the information automatically. Care partners can use Spaced Retrieval to give people with memory loss practice at remembering information until they can access it from memory with little cognitive effort. Spaced Retrieval can be used to teach facts such as a date, room number, or phone number. It can also be used to help someone remember to take a medication, refer to a schedule, or complete a task. Correctly remembering information is rewarding for people with memory loss; episodes of forgetfulness are frustrating and can often be embarrassing. The objective in using Spaced Retrieval is to create a learning opportunity that is successful.



*“If you practice something a little bit in the morning, and then a little bit later in the day, and then a little bit later in the day, when you space out your recall, you’re more likely to remember the information,” she says. “We know that when people practice recall, they can retain that information and it eventually will go into their long-term memory. They will be able to learn new information and retain information over very long periods of time.”*

In addition, Brush notes, if you verbalize something that is very important for you to remember, you will be more likely to learn and retain that information. This practice still holds true when someone has dementia.

“The technique won’t stall the dementia, but it definitely will help a person function better because now they’re independent for that piece of information or that task that they couldn’t remember before,” Brush says. “Our brain is so amazingly adaptive that when we start having difficulties, other parts of the brain just automatically compensate, but the changes that occur because of Alzheimer’s disease are easily occurring 20 years before people display any symptoms of memory loss or word finding problems. We don’t want to wait to practice these techniques until then.”



# Planning for the Possibility of Declined Brain Health

Dementia is physically, emotionally and economically overwhelming for the families of affected people and their care partners. Preparing for the possibility of declined brain health won't change that; however, getting your affairs in order now while you are healthy can lessen future burdens.

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## *Preparing Legal Documents*

According to Brush, all older adults — even those without cognitive impairment—should prepare for the future by taking a few practical steps. “The first thing to do would be to talk to your family and spouse about your advance directives. It’s important for you to communicate how you would like to be cared for if you are no longer able to make those decisions,” she says. “Your estate planning should also be taken care of. It’s critical to plan ahead so you can maximize the use and protection of your assets in case you have dementia or other health problems in the future.”

She continues, “You should also think about emergency preparedness. I recommend families prepare an emergency folder to keep in a prominent place so an emergency or healthcare professional, friend or family member would have easy access to it.”

For those with advanced dementia, include known triggers that cause the person to become agitated as well as “quick tricks” to calm the person. Household finances are another consideration. For more detailed information on preparing legal documents and talking with loved ones, see “I Care: A Handbook for Care Partners of People with Dementia,” by Jennifer Brush and Kerry Mills, MPA.



In an emergency folder, you should include:

- A complete medical history
- A current list of all medications
- Known allergies
- Copies of healthcare proxy and power of attorney
- Copies of insurance cards

## *Making Home Modifications*

Modifying the home environment with certain universal design features — those that create an attractive, stylish space that everyone regardless of age, size or ability can live in or visit—can improve safety and promote independence for people of all ages regardless of cognitive health.

You can easily make small modifications to your home by installing grab bars in the bathroom and increasing lighting in and around the house.

Home modifications for people with dementia in the early to mid-stages are usually made to compensate for memory, vision and hearing impairments. These modifications are usually simple and do not require any special expertise. They can include labels on things around the house and modified lighting to help with vision issues.

Home modifications for those in the later stages of the disease usually compensate for mobility and significant cognitive impairments. Often, these modifications will require a skilled contractor.

Every home and every person with dementia is unique. Therefore, a home modification that works for one person may not work for another. The best modifications are those tailored to the individual and home and created to take full advantage of a person's ability to continue to participate in daily activities and chores for as long as possible.

## *A Memory Center*

A memory center can assist someone with dementia by compensating for his or her cognitive losses. This memory center is a permanent place in the home to keep important information like daily schedules, times and locations of appointments, lists of visitors.



Include the following in your memory center:

- A large, easy-to-read digital clock
- A large, simple wall calendar
- A telephone with large numbers and a speakerphone capability
- Notebook and pens
- Emergency information like ambulance, fire and police numbers posted in large, easy-to-read format



# Life Doesn't End when Dementia Begins

If you or a loved one is diagnosed with a progressive, non-treatable cause of dementia like Alzheimer's disease, life will change drastically. But what's more important than the disease is how you approach it.

"It's important to stress that your life isn't over if you have dementia, and that you can still have a high quality of life," says Brush. "There are compensations that you can make. There's support that's available. It's important to live well and live as healthfully as possible throughout life."

An additional consideration, Brush says, is to speak up if you think you may be experiencing a cognitive issue.

"Talk to people when you think there is a problem," she advises. "Don't hide it because there's a variety of illnesses and diseases and vitamin deficiencies that cause symptoms of dementia, or can cause memory loss. It would be a shame if someone was experiencing memory loss that was treatable and they could be helped and they didn't get help because they didn't say anything."



## Preparing for a Doctor's Appointment

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It's best to bring a family member or friend to your appointment. At the appointment, your doctor will likely conduct a physical exam, may order additional tests and ask you questions like:

- How long have you been experiencing symptoms?
- What medications do you currently take?
- What tasks are you finding difficult to perform or finish?
- Have you recently been sick, fallen or been injured?





For more information on cognitive impairments or caring for those with cognitive impairments, see

*I Care: A Handbook for Care  
Partners of People with Dementia*

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For information on how Kendal at Home helps older adults stay independent or information regarding their work in developing innovative programs and training for those with dementia and their care partners, visit us online at [www.kendalathome.org](http://www.kendalathome.org) or call us at (877) 284-6639.

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