

# What Do I Need to Know?



## Some Facts

### What is Dementia?

Dementia is a brain disorder affecting a person's ability to carry out daily activities. The most common form of dementia among seniors is Alzheimer's disease, which involves the parts of the brain that control thought, memory, and language. There is no known cause or cure for Alzheimer's disease; however, medications, along with other treatments and strategies, will help you and the Veteran you care for enjoy a better quality of life.

### Treatment May Include:

medications may help with symptoms, but currently there is no treatment to stop or reverse Alzheimer's disease.

## Physical and Mental Changes to Expect

There are some common mental changes that can occur with people diagnosed with Alzheimer's or dementia, but each person will have a different experience. A Veteran with either of these conditions may be very unpredictable. Alzheimer's disease begins slowly and ends with severe brain damage. As the disease progresses, symptoms are more easily noticeable and become serious enough to cause individuals with Alzheimer's disease or their family members to seek professional caregiving help.

**Physical changes may include:** forgetting how to brush his/her teeth or comb his/her hair; incontinence, which means being unable to control bodily functions; poor eating habits, and problems with speaking, understanding, reading, and writing.

**Mental changes may include:** mild to severe forgetfulness; trouble remembering recent events, activities, or names of familiar people or things; being unable to make decisions and handle money; hallucinations and/or delusions.

**Emotional issues may include:** anxiety, depression, and sundowning — a condition in which the Veteran may suffer extreme agitation and confusion during the late afternoon or early evening hours.

**Other problems associated with the disease may include:** behavior problems such as sleeplessness, agitation, becoming aggressive, repeating questions, wandering, and wanting to be with his or her Caregivers all of the time.

## What Does This Mean for Me?

As a Caregiver, you can have a positive impact on how the Veteran you care for deals with this condition. You can be encouraging and supportive as he or she faces the struggles, frustrations and changes associated with conditions like Alzheimer's and dementia.

The life of the Veteran you care for can change depending on the types and severity of symptoms he or she is experiencing. Your life may change dramatically as you adjust your already busy schedule to include increasing care needs for

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the Veteran you care for. In addition, the amount of information you'll need to make good caregiving decisions may feel overwhelming — this is a normal reaction.

Remember that you are not alone and that it's okay to ask for help. Caregiving is very demanding, so don't feel guilty or as though you have failed if you need help. Support is available, and you should feel comfortable seeking it out. If you don't know who to turn to, a good first step is to call VA's Caregiver Support Line at 1-855-260-3274.

## Caregiving Tips

1. Educate yourself. Understanding Alzheimer's disease and its related physical and emotional symptoms will help you and the Veteran you care for in coping with the disease and in managing it for the long term.
2. To help minimize confusion while you are providing care for the Veteran, give short simple instructions in a calm voice, and stick to a routine whenever possible.
3. If the Veteran you care for is experiencing restlessness, keep him or her active during the day, or provide him or her with simple tasks. These tips can help keep the Veteran you care for occupied and reduce restlessness.
4. If the Veteran you care for is having a hard time controlling his or her bodily functions, accidents and receiving assistance in the bathroom can be embarrassing and uncomfortable. In these instances, offer him or her reassurance and support, and, if an accident occurs, don't blame or scold.
5. You can't predict where or when the Veteran you care for might wander. Modify your home environment to make it safe, have the Veteran wear an identity bracelet, and let neighbors know about his or her condition so they can assist you in keeping the Veteran you care for safe if he or she leaves the home unexpectedly.
6. Choose clothes that are easy to care for and use Velcro instead of zippers and buttons when possible.
7. The Veteran you care for will have good days and bad days, both emotionally and physically — which can be hard on you. If you become frustrated, step away for a little while. Ask someone to stay with the Veteran so you can catch a break. You can also take the Veteran you care for to adult day care or request respite up to three times a year from VA to give you some time by yourself.
8. Visit your doctor regularly for YOUR needs, and get plenty of rest so you can stay strong. Remember, you are doing the best you can and you are making a difference in your loved one's life. Your health is essential to your ability to keep providing for the Veteran you care for.



### I have more questions. Where can I go for help?

VA knows that being a Caregiver can be both rewarding and hard. You can always find more information at [www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov), including contact information for the VA Caregiver Support Coordinator nearest you.

You can also call VA's Caregiver Support Line  
**toll-free at 1-855-260-3274.**

The Caregiver Support Line is open  
Monday through Friday, 8:00 am – 11:00 pm ET,  
and Saturday, 10:30 am – 6:00 pm ET.

#### Call to talk to caring professionals who can:

- Tell you about the assistance available from VA.
- Help you access services and benefits.
- Connect you with your local Caregiver Support Coordinator at a VA Medical Center near you.
- Just listen, if that's what you need right now.