

# Caregiver Assistance News

“CARING FOR YOU...CARING FOR OTHERS”

## Understanding Alzheimer’s Disease

### How to Tell If a Person with Alzheimer’s Disease Is in Pain

It can be difficult to figure out whether someone with dementia is in pain, and what is causing the pain. People with dementia may not be able to tell you in words that they are in pain, or even where the pain is. Sometimes they can be in great pain, and not be able to communicate directly.

In the early stage of dementia, he or she may answer in what seems like a response to the question the doctor is asking—even though they do not understand the question—but is simply trying to be helpful. For example, wherever the doctor touches and asks, “Does it hurt here?” They may keep saying, “Yes.” This does not help the doctor to figure out where the pain is.

You know the person in your care better than the doctor, so you will be able to interpret her way of communicating. Here are some signs of pain that will be of help when the person is unable to tell you directly—

- verbal cues—crying or moaning, calling out
- rubbing or protecting one part of the body
- facial expression, frowning, or grimacing



- decreased activity level
- trouble sleeping
- a stiffened upper or lower body that is held rigidly and moved slowly
- increased agitation, aggressive behavior, pacing or rocking
- mental status changes, increased confusion or irritability

Each person has his or her own pain signature. You, as caregiver, will know what behavior is typical. You can recognize that there is a change in behavior and perhaps when that change indicates pain.

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on page 2

## What to Do in an Emergency

In the course of caring for a person with Alzheimer's disease it is likely that an accident will occur or that the person will appear to be seriously ill. A person with dementia can fall and break a bone and not complain of pain. On the other hand, a relatively minor illness or discomfort may make the person extremely upset. Because of his dementia, the person may not be able to help you to decide what kind of care is needed. Is this an emergency? If it is, you should call 911, the fire department or whatever agency is in charge of sending the Emergency Medical Service in your area. You should *not* try to take the person to the emergency room on your own. How can you decide that there is an emergency? The following signs always indicate an emergency that needs *immediate* attention—



- ☞ loss of consciousness or a marked change in mental state
- ☞ sudden severe chest pain
- ☞ a fall that results in severe pain or inability to move
- ☞ an accident that results in a blow to the head
- ☞ uncontrollable bleeding
- ☞ high fever accompanied by confusion and delusions
- ☞ difficulty breathing
- ☞ repeated or forceful vomiting
- ☞ failure to urinate for more than twelve hours
- ☞ sudden slurring of speech, loss of vision or balance, extreme weakness
- ☞ violent or uncontrollable behavior
- ☞ swallowing a poisonous substance

Even if none of these signs are present and you think that the person is seriously ill, call for emergency help. No caregiver looks forward to a visit to the emergency room, but it is a better alternative than neglecting a situation that could be life threatening.

### NOTE

If the person in your care is enrolled in a hospice program, find out in advance what arrangements the program has for emergency care.

### Tip

If the situation allows, ask that the person be taken to the hospital with which his doctor is affiliated to facilitate continuity of care.

Once you arrive in the emergency room do your best to stay with the person in your care and to inform all staff members that he has Alzheimer's disease and may not be able to provide accurate information about his condition or to follow their instructions.

### *Taking Care of Yourself*—Telling Family Stories

Remembering past events in one's life is something valuable and therapeutic for the elderly and their families. By being able to relate their past, the elderly become more cognizant, feel less depressed, and improve their behavior. Like a potion, it improves self-esteem and makes one have a more positive outlook for the future.

The process of writing past events can also pave the way to shake off some of the past, and seniors are able to think differently about their lives. Be it individually or in structured groups, life-writing encourages recollection of family relationships, career accomplishments, and major turning points in life.



### Be Wary of Scams - Track Purchases and Payments

Monitoring a parent's purchases and payments can clue you into purchases and/or payment requests that maybe fraudulent.

### Live Life Laughing!

Never make fun of me when teaching me how to use a computer. I taught you how to use a spoon.



### Inspiration

*'You can observe a lot by watching.'*  
Yogi Berra

### Don't Fall – Be Safe

As we age, our feet can change shape and lose some feeling. This changes the way we walk and affects balance. Wear comfortable, firm-fitting, flat shoes with a low broad heel and soles that grip.

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## **SAFETY TIPS—Dehydration**

A major cause of emergency room visits for frail or demented older adults is dehydration.

Dehydration occurs when a person is either not getting enough liquids daily or excreting too much urine. The body's ability to detect thirst diminishes with age. Illness and medication can also cause dehydration. Signs and symptoms of dehydration include:

- ★ Headache—the most common symptom
- ★ Dry mouth and tongue; cracked lips
- ★ Dry skin
- ★ Sunken eyes
- ★ Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea
- ★ Dark, strong smelling urine
- ★ Weight loss
- ★ Fast heart beat; low blood pressure
- ★ Confusion, light-headedness
- ★ Disorientation

NEXT ISSUE... EATING RIGHT WHEN MONEY'S TIGHT

# Caregiver Assistance News

“ C A R I N G F O R Y O U ... C A R I N G F O R O T H E R S ”

## Q U I C K Q U I Z

Sometimes people with Alzheimer's use salty language, especially when in pain, which they never would have used before they became ill. Don't be offended. It is the disease speaking. Read the issue and answer True or False to the questions below.

1. People with dementia can always tell you in words that they are in pain, or even where the pain is located.  
T F
2. A person with dementia always understands what the doctor is asking her about her pain.  
T F
3. Rubbing or protecting one part of his or her body may be a sign of pain.  
T F
4. A person with dementia can fall and break a bone, and not complain of pain.  
T F
5. You should not try to take the person with dementia to the emergency room on your own.  
T F
6. In the emergency room inform all staff members that the senior has Alzheimer's disease and may *not* be able to provide accurate information about his condition or to follow their instructions.  
T F
7. A major cause of emergency room visits for frail or demented older adults is dehydration.  
T F
8. The caregiver or loved one knows what behavior is typical and that a change in behavior perhaps indicates pain.  
T F
9. Increased agitation, aggressive behavior, pacing or rocking can be a sign of pain.  
T F
10. Dehydration occurs when a person is either not getting enough liquids daily or excreting too much urine.  
T F

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_