

# Depression and Alzheimer's Dementia

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## **What is depression and how does it relate to Alzheimer's Dementia?**

Depression is an illness characterized by persistent sadness or a loss of interest in pleasurable activities. The National Alzheimer's Association estimates that up to 40 out of 100 (40%) of people with Alzheimer's dementia (AD) suffer from significant depression. This is somewhat higher than the estimated 15 out of 100 (15%) to 20 out of 100 (20%) older adults in the general population who have experienced depression.

## **What are the causes of depression in people with AD?**

There are many different causes of depression. Often the frustration associated with having dementia can lead to depression, particularly in the early stages of the disease. Other possible causes of depression include:

- Medication side effects
- Some medical conditions
- Coping with a serious illness
- Stressful life transitions (such as a recent move or loss of a spouse),
- A family history of depression

## **What are the symptoms of depression?**

Some of the symptoms of depression are similar to the symptoms of AD and other dementias. Common symptoms of depression include:

- Consistently sad mood
- Decreased pleasure in usual activities
- Agitation
- Irritability

- Withdrawal from social activities
- Weight changes due to overeating or lack of appetite
- Sleep disturbances
- Unexplainable aches and pains
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- Recurrent thoughts of death

People with AD may experience one or two of these symptoms from time to time. However, if they are experiencing three or more symptoms and they last for more than 2 weeks, it is important to consult a doctor.

### **How is depression diagnosed?**

An evaluation for depression usually begins by asking the person with dementia and their family members about mood and behavior symptoms. A depression screening questionnaire may be used. A physical exam, review of medications, and blood tests may also be done to look for medical causes of depression.

Thinking tests may be done to help distinguish the effects of depression from effects of dementia. Because the symptoms of depression are similar to those of dementia, making a diagnosis can be difficult. In some instances, the skills of a specialist, such as a geriatric psychiatrist (a doctor trained in the mental health needs of older adults) or a neurologist (brain doctor) specializing in Alzheimer's dementia, may be recommended.

### **What are the options for treatment of depression?**

Depression is highly treatable. The first step is correcting any underlying medical conditions.

Medication is commonly used for the treatment of depression. There are several different types and brands of medications, and it is important to work with a doctor to find the medication that works best. Medications may help to improve mood, appetite, and sleep patterns. It may take several weeks to see the full effect of a medication for depression.

Psychological therapy can also be very helpful in treating depression. The person with depression may find relief in talking with a therapist or counselor about their experience and feelings.

Community resources, such as support groups, can also be helpful – particularly for people with early-stage AD. A support group allows the person to talk to others who are experiencing similar feelings and emotions.

Environmental changes can also be made by the family and caregivers to improve the mood of the person with depression. Examples include:

- A consistent daily routine
- Regular exercise
- Reducing bright lights, loud noises, and other sources of over-stimulation
- Activities or visits with friends and family
- Positive feedback and reassurance

Different treatments work for different people. For some people, joining a support group and making simple changes in their daily routine may be helpful. For others, a combination of medication and psychological therapy is best. The good news is that people usually feel better when they find the right treatment.

## Additional Resources

Find additional resources regarding depression and dementia at:

- The Alzheimer’s Association  
[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org) or by calling (800) 272-3900
- The National Institute on Aging  
[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov) or by calling (800) 438-4380
- University of Michigan Comprehensive Depression Center  
[www.med.umich.edu/depression](http://www.med.umich.edu/depression) or by calling (800) 475-6424

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