

Dementia patients benefit from hospice care

By Kimberly Brown

Even after years of living with Alzheimer's dementia, the latest stages of the disease can cause unexpected upheaval. Hospice care may help.

Family, friends and professional caregivers may notice that the dementia sufferer has become sicker and weaker. Caregivers may have more trouble getting their loved one to medical appointments. The disease may be causing more struggles with eating, communicating or agitation. There may suddenly be new decisions about where the person can be cared for safely. Everyone may be grieving the losses that Alzheimer's has brought. A professional hospice team may be able to help them cope.

A person must meet certain guidelines to enroll in hospice. A medical provider must certify that the person might die within six months – if their disease follows a usual course.

For Alzheimer's dementia, generally the person must be incontinent of bowels and bladder to qualify for hospice. The individual also must be unable to dress or bathe without help. They are losing or have lost ability to communicate in words – for example, using less than six words a day on average. Additional medical issues may contribute to a hospice decision, such as weight loss or swallowing problems, illnesses like pneumonia or urinary tract infections, or open wounds.

With hospice, the focus is on comfort, quality of life and support for both family/friend caregivers and their loved one. A hospice team includes nurses, social workers, home health aides, chaplains, trained volunteers and medical providers with expertise in end-of-life care.

Hospice can help families understand what physical changes to expect as their loved one nears death. They can suggest or provide medical equipment and resources. When the patient is no longer able to speak, hospice professionals can help caregivers assess whether the loved one is experiencing pain or other distress. The hospice team can help find ways to prevent or deal with restlessness and agitation.

Hospitalizations and medical office visits can be especially hard on a person with Alzheimer's dementia. The hospice team can often suggest ways to deal with health issues – without moving the patient from home.

Sometimes hospice support is enough to help a person to remain in their familiar place until death. When that is not possible, the hospice team can help families sort through other living options.

Finally, hospice offers bereavement support. When you care for someone with Alzheimer's dementia, you may grieve the loss of who that person once was – even while they are still alive. The death of that loved one may trigger unexpected reactions. Hospice offers bereavement support to families and caregivers from the time of enrollment. Bereavement support is also offered for a year after the loved one's death.

If you or your loved one is struggling with the changes that come at the end of Alzheimer's disease, please reach out. Consider whether hospice might be a help to you.

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