Dementia is a slow, progressive decline in brain function that affects a person’s ability to carry out everyday activities. There may be personality changes, problems with language or forgetting common words, and a person may be easily disoriented or become lost.

Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia among older people. It involves the part of the brain that controls thought, memory and language. The risk of Alzheimer’s goes up with age, and most people with the disease are 65 and older. However, researchers remind us that Alzheimer’s isn’t a normal part of aging.

KNOWING WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Someone who’s suffering memory loss or other signs of dementia may not recognize they have a problem. And unless you see a loved one on a regular basis, things may seem normal on the outside. According to Joy Loverde, author of The Complete Eldercare Planner, it’s vital to separate normal forgetfulness or procrastination from patterns of change or neglect. Things to watch for include:

- Are there changes in walking, talking, eating or managing medications?
- Has their appearance become sloppy?
- Are they bathing or cleaning their teeth less often?
- Are there stacks of unopened mail around? Have bills been paid?
- Is the food supply low or is there a foul smell in the refrigerator?
- Is there weight loss, insomnia or fatigue?
- Is there a lack of interest in friends or activities?
- Is there talk of being sad or depressed?
- Is there a personality change such as being argumentative or withdrawn?
- Is there confusion, loss of reasoning skills or consistent forgetfulness?
- Is there a struggle to remember words or names of familiar people or objects?
- Are they forgetting how to do ordinary things such as use a pencil or lock a door?

Even if you see some of these warning signs, don’t jump to conclusions and assume your loved one has dementia. First consult their doctor and describe what you’re seeing, as sometimes medications or a medical condition might be causing the unusual behavior. When help is clearly needed, go with your loved one to seek a professional evaluation.

CHOOSING A SPECIAL CARE COMMUNITY

There are many types of special care communities that cater to the needs of older adults. They range from continuing care retirement communities to assisted living communities to specialized memory care centers. When considering a community, here are some questions to ask:

- Is it specifically designed for residents with Alzheimer’s/memory loss disorders?
- Does it provide for safe wandering indoors and out?
- Is the overall lighting even?
- Are there personal private areas?
- Are there colors or other cues to define areas?
- Are the bathrooms identifiable and safe?
- Do the furniture arrangements encourage interaction?
- Are there private places for the family to interact with their loved one?
- Are there opportunities for nurturing?
- Is it comfortable and clean?
- Is the location convenient for you and your family?
- Who does the initial assessment of your family member?
- How often are subsequent assessments done?
- Is there a full daily schedule for residents?
- Are current residents active?
- What’s the philosophy of care?
- What training does the staff receive?

If you choose a community that doesn’t provide specialized memory care, transfer to another community may be necessary as your loved one’s needs progress. An individual with Alzheimer’s disease or a related memory loss may no longer have the capabilities to initiate or manage important legal documents such as a living will or health care proxy. You may want to talk to your legal advisor about becoming your loved one’s guardian.
CARING FOR YOUR LOVED ONE AT HOME

In the early stages of dementia-related conditions, home care may be the best option. Caregiving for a loved one with Alzheimer’s/memory loss can be overwhelming, and it’s important to realize that you can’t care for your elder alone.

Here are a number of issues to consider:

- Can you make the home secure and safe?
- Are you capable of taking on physical care of care of your loved one?
- Can you hire nurses, home health aides or companions to come into your home to help and provide respite care for you, the caregiver?
- Is there a nearby adult day center for memory-impaired seniors?
- Are there opportunities for physical and social activities with others, and mental stimulation for your loved one?
- Do you have a support system in place if your loved one’s condition worsens or they require round-the-clock care?

As driving ceases and other losses of independence occur with the progression of memory loss, the caregiver may have to look into a special memory care or Alzheimer’s residence, assisted living or skilled care nearby.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CARING FOR PEOPLE WITH ALZHEIMER’S/MEMORY LOSS

- Talk with family and friends upon diagnosis and continue to communicate.
- Ask for and accept practical help.
- Try to keep a balanced schedule for yourself and your family member.
- Learn everything you can about the condition.
- Simplify the environment for your loved one.
- Do things slowly for the affected person.
- Distract if there’s confusion.
- Acknowledge the disability.
- Treat the person with dignity.
- Praise the person for what they can do.
- Avoid confrontation.
- Be sure the person has something to do.
- Keep your sense of humor intact.
- Acknowledge the person’s feelings.
- Don’t threaten abandonment.
- Reassure if the person shows fear.
- Know that fantasy may be a coping device.
- Use person’s name when speaking to them.
- Avoid memory questions to limit frustration.
- Approach the person from the front to avoid surprise or fear.
- Use repetition.
- Use statements instead of questions.
- Make positive statements unless it’s a safety issue.
- Use specifics like chair and table, instead of it or there.
- Break tasks into smaller parts.
- Allow time for a damaged brain to understand and process information.

RESOURCES:
The Complete Eldercare Planner, Updated and Revised, 2009. Chapter 2: “Caregivers”. Adapted with permission by Joy Loverde

LINKS:
Alzheimer’s Association
alz.org
Alzheimer’s Disease Education & Referral (ADEAR) Center
nia.nih.gov/alzheimers
Alzheimer’s Foundation of America
alzfdn.org
The “E-cyclopedia” of housing options and information
seniorresource.com

Visit AscensionLiving.org to learn more about our nonprofit sponsor, Ascension Living, known and respected for providing high-quality, compassionate, personalized living choices for older adults.