



# Agitation

The term agitation is used to describe a large group of behaviors associated with Alzheimer's disease. As the disease progresses, most people with Alzheimer's experience agitation in addition to memory loss.

## **Agitated Behaviors**

In the early stages of the disease, people with Alzheimer's may experience personality changes such as irritability, anxiety, or depression. As the disease progresses, other symptoms may occur, including sleep disturbances, delusions (firmly held belief in things that are not real), hallucinations (seeing, hearing, or feeling things that are not there), pacing, constant movement or restlessness, checking and rechecking door locks or appliances, tearing tissues, general emotional distress, and uncharacteristic cursing or threatening language.

## **Possible Causes of Agitation**

Agitation may be caused by a number of different medical conditions and drug interactions or by any circumstances that worsen the person's ability to think. Situations that may lead to agitated behavior include moving to a new residence or nursing home, other changes in the environment or caregiver arrangements, misperceived threats, or fear and fatigue resulting from trying to make sense out of a confusing world.

## **Treating Agitation**

A person exhibiting agitated behavior should receive a thorough medical evaluation, especially when agitation comes on suddenly. The treatment of agitation depends on a careful diagnosis, determination of the possible causes, and the types of agitated behavior the person is experiencing. With proper treatment and intervention, significant reduction or stabilization of the symptoms can often be achieved.

There are two distinct types of treatments for agitation: behavioral interventions and prescription medications. Behavioral treatments should be tried first. In general, steps to managing agitation include (1) identifying the behavior, (2) understanding its cause, and (3) adapting the caregiving environment to remedy the situation.

## **Preventing Agitation**

General caregiving strategies to prevent or reduce agitated behaviors include the following:

- Create a calm environment: remove stressors, triggers, or danger; move person to a safer or quieter place; change expectations; offer security object, rest, or privacy; limit caffeine use; provide opportunity for exercise; develop soothing rituals; and use gentle reminders.
- Avoid environmental triggers: noise, glare, insecure space, and too much background distraction, including television.
- Monitor personal comfort: check for pain, hunger, thirst, constipation, full bladder, fatigue, infections, and skin irritation; ensure a comfortable temperature; be sensitive to fears, misperceived threats, and frustration with expressing what is wanted.
- Simplify tasks and routines.
- Allow adequate rest between stimulating events.
- Use lighting to reduce confusion and restlessness at night.

### **Identifying Agitation Triggers**

Correctly identifying what has triggered agitated behavior can often help in selecting the best behavioral intervention. Often the trigger is some sort of change in the person's environment:

- Change in caregiver
- Change in living arrangements
- Travel
- Hospitalization
- Presence of houseguests
- Bathing
- Being asked to change clothing

### **During an Episode of Agitation**

- **Do:** redirect the person's attention, back off and ask permission, use calm positive statements, reassure, slow down, use visual or verbal cues, add light, offer guided choices between two options, focus on pleasant events, offer simple exercise options, or limit stimulation.
- **Do not:** raise voice, take offense, corner, crowd, restrain, rush, criticize, ignore, confront, argue, reason, shame, demand, condescend, force, explain, teach, show alarm, or make sudden movements out of the person's view.
- **Say:** May I help you? Do you have time to help me? You're safe here. Everything is under control. I apologize. I'm sorry that you are upset. I know it's hard. I will stay until you feel better.

### **Safety Measures**

- Equip doors and gates with safety locks.
- Remove guns from the person's environment.