

Changes in Communication Skills

Communication is hard for people with Alzheimer's disease because they have trouble remembering things. They may struggle to find words or forget what they want to say. You may feel impatient and wish they could just say what they want, but they can't.

The person with Alzheimer's may have problems with:

- Finding the right word or losing his or her train of thought when speaking
- Understanding what words mean
- Paying attention during long conversations
- Remembering the steps in common activities, such as cooking a meal, paying bills, or getting dressed
- Blocking out background noises from the radio, TV, or conversations
- Frustration if communication isn't working
- Being very sensitive to touch and to the tone and loudness of voices



Help Make Communication Easier

The first step is to understand that the disease causes changes in communication skills. The second step is to try some tips that may make communication easier:

- Make eye contact and call the person by name.
- Be aware of your tone, how loud your voice is, how you look at the person, and your body language.
- Encourage a two-way conversation for as long as possible.
- Use other methods besides speaking, such as gentle touching.
- Try distracting the person if communication creates problems.

To encourage the person to communicate with you:

- Show a warm, loving, matter-of-fact manner.
- Hold the person's hand while you talk.

- Be open to the person’s concerns, even if he or she is hard to understand.
- Let him or her make some decisions and stay involved.
- Be patient with angry outbursts. Remember, it’s the illness “talking.”

To speak effectively with a person who has Alzheimer’s:

- Offer simple, step-by-step instructions.
- Repeat instructions and allow more time for a response. Try not to interrupt.
- Don’t talk about the person as if he or she isn’t there.
- Don’t talk to the person using “baby talk” or a “baby voice.”

Be Direct, Specific, and Positive

Here are some examples of what you can say:

- “Let’s try this way,” instead of pointing out mistakes.
- “Please do this,” instead of “Don’t do this.”
- “Thanks for helping,” even if the results aren’t perfect.

You also can:

- Ask questions that require a yes or no answer. For example, you could say, “Are you tired?” instead of “How do you feel?”
- Limit the number of choices. For example, you could say, “Would you like a hamburger or chicken for dinner?” instead of “What would you like for dinner?”
- Use different words if he or she doesn’t understand the first time. For example, if you ask the person whether he or she is hungry and you don’t get a response, you could say, “Dinner is ready now. Let’s eat.”
- Try not to say, “Don’t you remember?” or “I told you.”

If you become frustrated, take a timeout for yourself.



For more caregiving tips and other resources:

- **Read** “Caring for a Person with Alzheimer’s Disease”: www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publication/caring-person-alzheimers-disease
- **Visit** www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/topics/caregiving
- **Call** the ADEAR Center toll-free: 1-800-438-4380

The Alzheimer’s Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center is a service of the National Institute on Aging, part of the National Institutes of Health. The Center offers information and publications for families, caregivers, and professionals about Alzheimer’s disease and age-related cognitive changes.

