

# ALZHEIMER'S CAREGIVERS

Alzheimer's disease is a neurological condition in which the nerve cells in the brain die. The onset of Alzheimer's disease is typically gradual, and the first signs of it may be attributed to old age or ordinary forgetfulness. As the disease advances, cognitive abilities including the ability to make decisions and perform everyday tasks are eroded, and personality changes and difficult behaviors may emerge. An estimated four million people nationwide have been diagnosed with the disease.

Alzheimer's disease is often called a family disease, because the chronic stress of watching a loved one slowly decline affects everyone. Comprehensive treatment must therefore address the needs of the entire family. This includes emotional support, counseling, and educational programs about Alzheimer's disease for individuals and family members as they strive to provide a safe and comfortable environment at home. With two-thirds of all Alzheimer's patients initially cared for in the home, it is important for the caregiver to know where he or she can turn for help along with following some basic guidelines.

## Recommendations for Caregivers:

- » Learn about the disease. Know what can be expected as the disease progresses. Changes in personality and behavior are all part of the natural course of the disease. Education helps accept the situation, plan for the future and set realistic expectations for yourself and your loved one.
- » Remember, Alzheimer's is a disease. Although explaining the disease to others may be difficult, it helps friends, family and neighbors to understand the behavior of the patient and the stress experienced by the caregiver.
- » Ask for and accept help. Caregivers should not try to "go it alone." Through training, caregivers can learn how to control unwanted behaviors, improve communication, and keep the person with Alzheimer's safe. Research has shown that caregivers benefit from training and support groups and that participation in these groups allow caregivers to care for their loved one at home longer.
- » Take a break from being the primary caregiver. Ask your family or friends to help so you are able to take some time off. Whether it's just a few hours or a weekend away, relief is needed from the stressful situation.
- » Understand and accept your feelings. Families and caregivers experience many mixed and powerful feelings. Anger, grief, embarrassment, guilt and shame are several frequently experience emotions. Remember that these feelings are human responses that everyone feels and they are OK.
- » Make realistic commitments. It is very important not to sacrifice your physical and emotional health. Besides the Alzheimer's patient, other family members most likely depend on you too. "Overloading your circuits" will create additional stress that is not healthy for yourself or your family.
- » Join a support group. Family support groups can provide a tremendous source of information and understanding. Sharing with others who are in the same situation reduces feelings of isolation and guilt.

# ALZHEIMER'S CAREGIVERS *continued*

Learn more:

Inland Northwest Alzheimer's Association  
(<https://www.alz.org/alzwa>)

Aging and Long-Term Support Administration  
(<https://my.spokanecity.org/bcc/boards/aging-and-long-term-care-of-eastern-washington/>)