

The word *dementia* can feel overwhelming, but aging expert Jill Ladaa offers hope. Like any medical diagnosis, it's important to be informed—not just about facts, but also misconceptions.

“The first thing I tell families is that dementia is not a single disease; it's an umbrella term we use to describe symptoms of memory loss, language, and other reasoning skills that interfere with daily life,” says Ladaa. “There are hundreds of types of dementias with varying degrees of severity.”

The most widely recognized dementia is Alzheimer's disease, which affects an estimated 7.2 million Americans, but other varieties include Lewy body dementia, vascular dementia, and frontotemporal dementia—each with their own set of symptoms and care plans. Some types of dementia begin presenting as early as one's 40s, while others are more commonly detected in ages 60 and above. All, however, are progressive in nature and impact a person's daily living.

“Early diagnosis provides greater opportunity to intervene early, slowing progression of the disease and maintaining functional abilities for as long as possible,” says Ladaa. “We want to address the stigma of a dementia diagnosis. There are many emotions that come with it, but the most important message is that you can live well with a diagnosis.”

NAVIGATING A DEMENTIA DIAGNOSIS

According to the U.S. POINTER Study¹ led by the Alzheimer's Association, older adults who are at risk for cognitive decline can benefit from proactive lifestyle changes. The study found that a comprehensive approach—focusing on healthy eating, consistent physical activity, staying mentally active, and maintaining social connections—can significantly improve cognition. Even everyday habits, such as staying hydrated, can make a difference in how clearly a person thinks and functions.

“No one thinks clearly when they're dehydrated, so for a person living with dementia, you can imagine how dehydration compounds their symptoms,” says Ladaa.

Being mindful of your loved one's nonverbal communication is essential to supporting their well-being while living with dementia. “If someone has a sudden increase in confusion, agitation, or reduced physical function, the first thing I ask is whether they have been checked for an infection. As the disease progresses, communicating pain or discomfort can become difficult; therefore, the person living with dementia may express physical distress through changes in behavior or routine,” says Ladaa.

“While there is no cure,” she continues, “adopting a brain-healthy lifestyle and connecting with others navigating a dementia diagnosis can positively affect your cognitive health and improve the quality of life for those living with dementia.”

WHEN TO SEEK AN EVALUATION

There's normal cognitive aging, and then there's warning signs for dementia. How can families know the difference? There is no absolute answer, but there are helpful guidelines. Ladaa says that normal aging might look like forgetting where you put your keys but then remembering how to retrace steps and eventually find them. “If you're able to troubleshoot, that's a good sign,” Ladaa says.

While memory loss that disrupts daily life is a hallmark of dementia, Ladaa notes that confusion about time or place, poor judgment, and changes in mood may also signal the need to see your doctor. A sudden loss of interest in or difficulty managing routine tasks—such as paying bills—is another important reason to schedule an evaluation.



“My father was an avid investor and loved tracking his money. When we noticed he was no longer opening bank statements because he had lost the capacity to understand them, that was a major change in his behavior and a sign to speak to his doctor,” says Ladaa.

Other signs might be a deterioration in hygiene, missing important dates or appointments, making uncharacteristically risky decisions, making vague substitutes for words, or struggling to find words.

“For example, is the person describing a thing on the wrist for time rather than coming up with the word *watch*?” says Ladaa. “These are not always early signs of dementia, but they are a signal to seek an evaluation.”

If you have a good and long-established relationship with a general provider, start there. Otherwise, it may be wise to see a neurologist or provider who specializes in brain diseases and is well versed in the various types of dementia, as well as keeps up on the latest research. “We're always learning new information about different dementias at lightning speed,” says Ladaa. “An expert can help guide you toward the correct care pathway.”

AFTER A DEMENTIA DIAGNOSIS

Facing stigma remains a significant concern for people living with dementia and their care partners. Many report feeling misunderstood due to misconceptions about the diseases, including the belief that diagnosis of dementia means a person can no longer participate in decision-making. Not only may this not be true, but this assumption can hinder the person's independence and diminish their sense of purpose.

“Normalizing conversations about cognitive health helps replace fear with understanding and supports the person living with the diagnosis,” Ladaa says. “It's important that people living with dementia continue to be involved in decisions and contribute in ways that align with their preferences and abilities. Tasks and conversations may need to be simplified or broken into small pieces to set the person up for success.”

Ladaa also encourages early conversations about future support preferences and goals as the disease progresses. This is a good time to ensure advance directives such as living wills, durable power of attorney for healthcare, and other legal documents are in place. Discussing

and documenting care preferences not only helps a person receive care aligned with their wishes, it can also provide clarity and peace of mind for care partners who may need to make decisions on the person's behalf over time.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CARE

Sometimes, future support includes a senior living community. Brookdale Senior Living, a senior living company that specializes in memory care, offers progressive levels of care within the same system. Selecting a community for those living with dementia should be guided by their preferences, values, and daily routines.

“While family members play a key role, centering the voice of the person living with dementia honors their autonomy and promotes dignity,” says Ladaa. “When visiting communities for my dad, choosing a setting that aligned with his interests and values was important to ensure his care truly supported his lifestyle. This meant a small and minimalist community and not the resort-like community that I would prefer.”

Because nutrition is such a key piece in supporting cognitive health, it's crucial to consider the Alzheimer's and dementia community's dining experience. Is food served with individual preferences in mind? Are prompts and cues used to support residents' dignity? Is the atmosphere calm to minimize distractions? For someone living with dementia, an abundance of food options or distractions may be overwhelming and may hinder their ability to be successful during dining.

“At Brookdale, we say we earn our residents' trust at every meal because we have tools in place to truly support every person's nutrition and hydration needs,” says Ladaa. “Our residents are set up to be successful and to live their optimum lives.”

Another consideration is the community's ability to provide “person-centered” care, rather than one-size-fits-all services. This means taking the time to understand each resident's values and preferences, then providing outlets to let them engage in their unique interests. This might look like a calendar of diverse programming, or it might simply mean providing opportunities for quiet moments with tea and a book. It also means having staff who accommodate the resident's preferred schedule for eating, sleeping, and other activities. “At Brookdale, a resident's life doesn't begin at our doors; it continues through them,” says Ladaa.



As for dementia care, Brookdale has employees who are essentialALZ[®] certified and has dedicated an entire team to residents and families, providing access to appropriate and up-to-date resources for all stages of the disease. And as a senior living company with a gerontologist on staff, Brookdale is up to date on the latest research and care plans for those with dementia.

PART OF THE BROOKDALE FAMILY

From independent living to Alzheimer's and dementia care, Brookdale is committed to involving families in their loved ones' care. “We truly view families as partners,” says Ladaa. “We want their input to support their loved one.”

Monthly educational programming is offered to empower families with the knowledge they need to make individualized choices regarding care. Through the Brookdale EMBRACE Family Partnership Program, family members and caregivers are invited to learn about dementia topics and receive peer support from others in similar positions.

“There is so much value in just knowing that you're not alone,” says Ladaa. “Whether you end up at Brookdale or not, we want families navigating a dementia diagnosis to feel supported.”

Recognizing that in-person meetings can feel intimidating, Brookdale also offers educational resources online, including “The Grey Take” podcast, which explores the messy, complicated, and often unexpected realities of growing older from the perspective of the adult children navigating it.

Receiving a dementia diagnosis brings complex emotions, including fear, sadness, and even relief for everyone involved. If you or a loved one has been recently diagnosed, remember that you are not alone. “There are many ways to maintain meaning and connection and to ultimately live with a better sense of well-being,” concludes Ladaa. “For more than 30 years, Brookdale has been the leader in Alzheimer's and dementia care. We invite you to connect with us through our podcast, the EMBRACE Family Partnership Program, or by visiting one of our communities.”

**Call 877-701-6556 or visit
Brookdale.com/dementiacare
for more information or to register for
an upcoming event.**

¹ Baker LD, Espeland MA, Whitmer RA, et al. Structured vs Self-Guided Multidomain Lifestyle Interventions for Global Cognitive Function: The US POINTER Randomized Clinical Trial. JAMA. 2025;334(8):681-691. doi:10.1001/jama.2025.12923

