

# CLEAR Communication Toolkit

## Glossary for People Expecting a Diagnosis

Talking to health-care providers can be confusing sometimes. To help, here is a list explaining some of the words health-care providers may use during your appointment(s).

### A

- **Activities of Daily Living (ADLs):** Tasks you do to take care of your body, such as eating, bathing and going to the toilet. [Learn more about day-to-day care here.](#)
- **Advance Directives (ADs):** Also called living wills. ADs are documents allowing someone else to make medical-related decisions on behalf of a person with dementia if they were to lose their ability to make decisions on their own. [Learn more about advance directives here.](#)
- **Agnosia:** The loss of the ability to recognize people, sounds, or objects.
- **Allied health professional:** A health professional who is not a doctor, nurse, dentist, optometrist or pharmacist. Allied health professionals include social workers, occupational therapists, and physician assistants.
- **Altered perception:** The loss of the ability to understand what is going on around you. For instance, someone with altered perception may mistake one object for another.

- **Alzheimer's disease:** A type of dementia. Symptoms may include changes in memory, mood, personality and behaviour, as well as difficulties with thinking, movement, vision, problem-solving and communication. Symptoms consistently affect day-to-day life. Alzheimer's disease is caused by plaques and tangles in the brain (see the definitions for "plaques" and "tangles" in this glossary). [Learn more about Alzheimer's disease here.](#)
- **Amnesia:** Another word for memory loss. Amnesia/memory loss is gradual in people living with dementia.
- **Anomia:** The loss of the ability to remember or recognize the names of objects.
- **Anosognosia:** The loss of the ability to recognize changes to your body and brain. For example, people living with dementia may not understand that they have problems with using judgment or rational thinking.
- **Apathy:** Lack of interest, concern, or emotion. Apathy can sometimes be confused with depression.
- **Aphasia/Dysphasia:** The loss of the ability to use and understand language.
- **Apraxia:** The loss of the ability to properly plan and do the steps required for a task. Apraxia can also cause someone to have trouble understanding directions (e.g. up, down, left, right).
- **Assessment:** An evaluation of a person's physical and cognitive condition, or of their personal needs.

- **Attention deficits:** Difficulties with keeping focused on one thing, or with switching focus from one thing to another.

## B

- **Behaviour (changes in behaviour):** A person with dementia behaving differently than they normally would. For example, they may have trouble controlling their anger, or become more withdrawn. [Learn more about changes in behaviour here.](#)

## D

- **Delusion:** A belief that an event is true even though it is clearly false. An example of a delusion is believing that someone else is living in your house, even though you live alone. [Learn more about delusions here.](#)
- **Dementia:** A broad term that describes a set of symptoms that may include changes in memory, mood, personality and behaviour, as well as difficulties with thinking, movement, vision, problem solving and communication. Symptoms consistently affect day-to-day life. These symptoms are caused by various diseases and conditions. There are different types of dementia, depending on the cause. [Learn more about dementia here](#), and [learn about some of the different types of dementia here.](#)
- **Depression:** An abnormal emotional condition that includes feelings of worthlessness, sadness, emptiness, and hopelessness. [Learn more about depression here.](#)

## E

- **EEG:** Short for electroencephalogram—a type of test that studies the messages sent by nerve cells in your brain. [Learn more about getting a diagnosis here.](#)

## F

- **Frontal lobe:** An area of the brain located behind the forehead. It controls thinking, personality, and emotions.
- **Frontotemporal dementia (FTD):** A group of disorders that mainly affect the frontal and temporal regions of the brain (see the definitions for “frontal lobe” and “temporal lobe”). Early symptoms are usually related to changes in behaviour or speech. [Learn more about frontotemporal dementia here.](#)

## G

- **Gait:** The way a person walks.

## H

- **Hallucination:** Sensing something that isn't actually there. An example of a hallucination could be seeing bugs crawling all over the bed when there are no bugs. [Learn more about hallucinations here.](#)

- **IADLs (Instrumental Activities of Daily Living):** The tasks you do to take care of yourself and your home. These tasks are more complex than activities of daily living (ADLs). Examples of IADLs include money management, shopping, housekeeping, and answering the telephone.
- **Incontinence:** Trouble controlling the bladder or the bowels, resulting in accidental leakage of urine or feces (poop). [Learn more about personal care here.](#)

- **Late day confusion (also known as sundowning):** Confusion that may occur in people living with dementia at the end of the day. [Learn more about late day confusion here.](#)
- **Lewy body dementia:** A type of dementia characterized by abnormal deposits of a protein called alpha-synuclein. The symptoms of Lewy body dementia are similar to the symptoms of both Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease. [Learn more about Lewy body dementia here.](#)
- **Long-term memory:** The memory of all events except for the most recent ones.

## M

- **Medical history:** A list or record of all the illnesses and treatments that you and your family have had in the past.

- **Mixed dementia:** A combination of two or more types of dementia. [Learn more about mixed dementia here.](#)
- **MMSE (Mini-Mental State Exam):** An exam that tests a person's basic cognitive abilities, such as memory, writing and language. [Learn more about getting a diagnosis here.](#)
- **MoCA (Montreal Cognitive Assessment):** An exam that tests a person's basic cognitive abilities, such as memory, language and concentration. [Learn more about getting a diagnosis here.](#)
- **MRI: Short for Magnetic Resonance Imaging.** This is a method of taking images of the inside of the body. [Learn more about getting a diagnosis here.](#)

## N

- **Neurodegenerative disease:** A disease characterized by a decline in the structure, activity, and function of the brain.
- **Neurology:** A field of medicine that deals with the nervous system. The nervous system includes the brain, spinal cord, and nerves, and is responsible for sending messages across your body.

## O

- **Occipital lobe:** An area of the brain located at the back of your head. The occipital lobe helps with your sense of sight.

## P

- **Paranoia:** Suspicion of others when there is no evidence or very little evidence to support the suspicion. An example of paranoia is accusing a person of trying to steal your belongings, even though the person is not trying to do that. [Learn more about paranoia here.](#)
- **Parietal lobe:** An area of the brain located at the top of your head. The parietal lobe helps with your sense of touch. It also helps you with spatial orientation.
- **Pathology:** The medical characteristics of a disease.
- **Person-centred care:** An approach to dementia care that considers an individual's unique needs and experiences.
- **Plaques:** One of the physical changes to the brain that happens in Alzheimer's disease. Plaques are clumps of a protein called beta amyloid, or A-beta. These plaques prevent messages from being transferred between nerve cells in the brain.
- **Power of Attorney:** A document in which one person (the donor) authorizes another (the attorney) to act on their behalf in some cases (e.g., when selling a property). There are two types of power of attorney: general power of attorney and enduring (or continuing) power of attorney. A general power of attorney is only valid when the donor is mentally capable of making decisions, and ends when they become incapable. An enduring power of attorney remains valid when the donor becomes mentally incapable. [Learn more about power of attorney here.](#)

- **Progressive:** Increasing in severity.
- **Psychosocial:** Relating to both psychological and social aspects.

## S

- **Short-term memory:** The memory of events that happened very recently.
- **Specialist:** A medical professional whose work focuses on a specific topic (e.g., geriatrician, neurologist, psychiatrist).
- **Sundowning:** See “late day confusion.”

## T

- **Tangles:** One of the physical changes to the brain that happens in Alzheimer’s disease. Tangles are fiber clumps of a protein called tau. Normally tau proteins transport nutrients around the brain. But in Alzheimer’s disease, tau proteins form tangles that prevent nutrients from reaching brain cells.
- **Temporal lobe:** An area of the brain that is located behind the ears. The temporal lobe helps with your sense of hearing and helps you remember things.

## V

- **Vascular dementia:** A type of dementia caused by lack of blood flow to the brain, stroke, or bleeding in the brain. [Learn more about vascular dementia here.](#)

## W

- **Walking about (also known as wandering):** A tendency for a person with dementia to walk around more than usual, such as walking repeatedly around the home. [Learn more about walking about here.](#)
- **Wandering:** See “walking about”.

## Y

- **Young onset dementia:** Dementia that occurs in people under the age of 65. [Learn more about young onset dementia here.](#)

## Need more information?

For useful resources, click the links below:

What is dementia?  
[alzheimer.ca/whatisdementia](https://alzheimer.ca/whatisdementia)

First steps after diagnosis  
[alzheimer.ca/firststeps](https://alzheimer.ca/firststeps)

Common questions about  
dementia  
[alzheimer.ca/commonquestions](https://alzheimer.ca/commonquestions)

You can also contact your local Alzheimer Society. Call 1-855-705-4636 or visit [alzheimer.ca/find](https://alzheimer.ca/find).

