

Dementia of the Alzheimer's Type – Description of Stages

Dementia of the Alzheimer's Type (DAT) results from Alzheimer's disease and involves progressive changes in memory and thinking ability. These changes in memory and thinking start out as minor problems, but gradually become major problems as years pass. Losses in mental abilities lead to problems handling complex and even everyday life tasks. People with DAT eventually require assistance of family members, health professionals and others to manage their daily routines. The progression of this brain disease is usually rather slow, however, and persons with Alzheimer's dementia can often enjoy a few years of full or partial independence before major problems set in.

Health professionals understand impairment in terms of a labeling system: very mild impairment, mild, moderate and severe. It is important when talking about dementia and issues of ability to have an understanding of these stages. Just being diagnosed with DAT, for example, does not necessarily mean that a person cannot do certain tasks. For example, a person might be fully capable of doing a certain task (e.g., cooking on a stove) when mildly impaired, but not in later stages.

Ella has **Very Mild Alzheimer's disease**. To others she seems perfectly normal. She is a little more forgetful and it worries her.



Now, Ella has **Mild Alzheimer's disease**. She generally looks and acts normal. She has difficulty remembering conversations and repeats herself. Her son supervises her checkbook and helps to arrange home repairs, but otherwise she manages reasonably well.



Ella has **Moderate Alzheimer's disease**. Others definitely notice a problem. She sometimes forgets to eat and she has difficulty recalling her address and phone number. She cannot take care of her house alone and her kids think she should move to a supervised setting.



Ella now has **Severe Alzheimer's disease**. She relies on others for all her care including dressing and bathing. She sometimes has urine accidents. Her memory of her own life is mostly a blur.

Definitions of Alzheimer's disease Stages based on the Clinical Dementia Rating

Very Mild Impairment in DAT – *Forgetfulness and possibly one or more of the other problems listed.*

- **Consistent slight forgetfulness with partial recollection of events.**
- Fully oriented except for slight difficulty with time relationships.
- Slight impairment in solving problems and in understanding similarities/differences between things or ideas (e.g., understanding that a trumpet and guitar are both *musical instruments*).
- Slight impairment in community activities and affairs.
- Life at home, hobbies and intellectual interests are slightly impaired.
- Fully capable of completing self-care tasks (e.g., bathing, dressing)

Mild Impairment in DAT – *Memory loss plus a few of the other problems listed.*

- **Moderate memory loss, more marked for recent events. This defect interferes with everyday activities.**
- Moderate difficulty with time relationships. The person may well be oriented to place at the time of examination, but may have geographic disorientation elsewhere.
- Moderate difficulty in handling problems and in understanding similarities/differences between things or ideas. Social judgment is usually OK.
- Generally unable to function independently in community activities, but may still be engaged in some. Appears normal upon casual inspection.
- Needs prompting to complete self-care tasks (e.g., bathing, dressing).

Moderate Impairment in DAT – *Memory loss plus a few of the other problems listed.*

- **Severe memory loss. Only highly learned material is retained. New material is lost rapidly.**
- Severe difficulty with time relationships – usually disoriented to time, often to place.
- Severely impaired in handling problems and in understanding similarities/differences. Social judgment is usually impaired.
- No pretense of independent functioning at home. Appears well enough to be taken to functions outside a family home.
- May retain ability to perform simple household chores. Very restricted interests that are poorly maintained.
- Requires assistance in dressing, hygiene, and keeping of personal effects.

Severe Impairment in DAT – *Memory loss plus a few of the other problems listed here.*

- Severe memory loss – only fragments remain.
- Oriented to person only – knows self but disoriented to both time and place.
- Unable to make judgments or solve problems.
- No pretense of independent function outside the home. Appears too ill to be taken to functions outside the family home.
- No significant function in terms of either home activities or hobbies.
- Requires much help with personal care tasks. Frequent incontinence is common.