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Partnering with Caregivers to Recognize Signs of Dementia

This resource describes how health center providers and staff can engage the informal caregivers of older adults to promote the early identification of cognitive decline that may lead to a dementia diagnosis. **For more information about the National Center for Equitable Care for Elders, visit ece.hsds.harvard.edu.**



Overview

As our country ages, the health and well-being of older Americans will need to be prioritized within primary care. With a projected population growth of up to 95 million individuals aged 65 and over by 2060, health centers will see their role in supporting community-dwelling older patients expand as well.¹ An important element of age-friendly healthcare is the ability to differentiate between normal signs of aging and abnormal changes in function that require further attention.

In the case of cognitive decline, there is a wide spectrum between a usual mild impact on memory or thinking speed, and an accelerated progression in later stages of a neurodegenerative disorder. The variability in symptoms and timelines can make early identification of mild cognitive impairment (MCI) more of a challenge in a primary care setting.² However, involving informal caregivers of older adults in their care can offer valuable insights for diagnosing and addressing symptoms of dementia.

Dementia is a general term for cognitive decline that interferes with daily life activities, with Alzheimer's disease being the most common form or type of dementia in older adults. While almost 6 million individuals are currently living with Alzheimer's disease in the United States, that number is projected to grow to 14 million by 2060.³ Cognitive decline and impairment caused by dementia can greatly impact the management of chronic conditions, which already disproportionately impact older adults. Detecting initial signs of dementia will better allow a healthcare team to reduce the risk of associated complications.

Informal caregivers, also known as "family caregivers", are individuals who

provide regular unpaid assistance to older adults living with certain health conditions or functional impairments. While involvement in an older individual's daily activities may vary, these caregivers take on a significant role in understanding and taking care of their social and health-related needs. This level of insight can be invaluable for a healthcare team to determine whether their older patient's recent symptoms are connected to a new challenge or are related to a lifelong behavior.

Help caregivers understand the 10 Warning Signs of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias



- **Disruptive memory loss**
- **Decreased or poor judgment**
- **Difficulty with familiar tasks**
- **Confusion with time or place**
- **New challenges with speaking or writing**
- **Spatial + vision issues**
- **Losing items and unable to retrace steps**
- **Withdrawal from normal activities**
- **Challenges with problem solving**
- **Changes in mood and personality**

While there is currently no universally agreed-upon cognitive assessment approach, there are several screening tools that can be used in primary care settings along with observational and patient-reported data.⁴ However, the stigma associated with a dementia diagnosis may limit the

level of comfort felt by both the patient and the provider to initially engage in an honest conversation about cognitive health. Normalizing this topic of discussion can empower older adults and their caregivers to understand common signs of dementia and to trust their care team to proactively provide support if needed. **Effective communication in this area will require health center providers and staff to:**

Understand the big picture

To determine if signs and symptoms are related to early stages of dementia, many areas must be explored with an older patient and their caregiver. An individual's family, medical, and prescription history should be thoroughly examined to identify possible causes of dementia-like symptoms, like an infection or drug interaction.

Be culturally responsive

Consider the health beliefs an older patient and their caregiver may have about dementia and the role of healthcare professionals in its treatment. Adapting your approach to meet the unique beliefs of the patient will allow for clearer communication and establish better rapport.

Validate their experience

Acknowledge the caregiver as an important part of the care team and express appreciation for their efforts in supporting the day-to-day needs of their care recipient. Providing supportive referrals to available community resources for both the patient and the caregiver before, during or after a dementia diagnosis can limit gaps in care and improve their overall well-being.

Resources

- [Stages & Behaviors](#) (Alzheimer's Association)
- [Healthy Brain Initiative Road Map Series](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [Early Detection of Dementia and the Goal of Population-based Care](#) (American Society on Aging)
- [What to Know About Dementia Screening and Assessment Tools](#) (Benjamin Rose Institute on Aging)
- [Dementia Road Map: A Guide for Family and Care Partners](#) (The Dementia Action Collaborative)

References

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