

COVID-19: Advice for caring for people with Alzheimer's disease, mild cognitive impairment

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With the COVID-19 pandemic at the forefront of daily life, how much information should you share with a loved one who has Alzheimer's disease, dementia or mild cognitive impairment? And how do you explain the necessary precautions and social distancing requirements? Dr. Joseph Sirven, a Mayo Clinic neurologist, says it depends on the person's exact condition.

"If someone is processing relatively well—they have, perhaps, [mild cognitive impairment](#), and are able to have good conversations and partake in the world—there's no problem with having just a general discussion about everything and reminding them about what they need to

do, such as washing their hands and everything that comes with good infection control," says Dr. Sirven.

For people who have dementia or more severe issues, such as Alzheimer's disease, and may not be able to process information, it's best to avoid discussions about COVID-19.

Since social distancing and isolation rules may make it more challenging to be with loved ones, Dr. Beth Rush, a Mayo Clinic neuropsychologist, says they may be agitated or anxious.

"It's important to validate their feelings and then offer a suggestion," Dr. Rush says. "For instance, you might say: 'I'm sorry I can't visit today and I know that's disappointing. But what if we set up a daily call at 8 a.m. to chat over coffee?'"

Also, since behavioral outbursts are common in patients with neurodegenerative disorders, now would be the time to develop a plan regarding extra support or when to call 911. "These patients can become confused or become very anxious or very nervous with any change in the [home environment](#)," says Dr. Sirven. "So it's important to keep the environment calm and have a plan regarding potential mediations or strategies to help alleviate things should the patient or situation become too difficult to manage."

Dr. Rush adds that caregivers should be honest with how they are feeling and not hesitate to ask for help if they feel overwhelmed.

"Caregiving can be a difficult task on a normal day. At a time when people are experiencing heightened stress and anxiety as well as loss of normalcy, it's important to do a personal check-in with yourself and acknowledge what you need to be at your best for your loved one. That may mean grabbing a snack, journaling, going for a walk, even taking a

nap," she says.

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