

ALZHEIMER'S TEXAS

March 5-6

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When Infection Mimics Progression: Urinary Tract Infections in Alzheimer's

By Austin McKee, LMSW

What Is a UTI?

A urinary tract infection (UTI) occurs when bacteria enter the urinary tract, leading to infection. While both men and women can develop UTIs, they are far more common in women. Often dismissed as minor and easily treatable, UTIs can take on a very different trajectory as a person ages. For older adults, particularly those with conditions like Alzheimer's disease, a UTI can cause sudden and significant changes in behavior and health, underscoring the importance of recognizing and addressing these infections promptly.

Impacts on the Brain

When an older adult with Alzheimer's develops a UTI, the body responds by releasing chemicals to fight the infection. While this reaction is usually contained, it can sometimes affect brain function, especially in those with dementia. This may be due in part to age-related changes, including a weakened ability to keep harmful substances out of the brain. As a result, the infection can trigger sudden confusion, agitation, or even hallucinations. Because these symptoms can resemble Alzheimer's progression, they are often overlooked. However, they may actually be signs of delirium—a serious but treatable condition that requires quick medical attention.

Alzheimer's Stages and UTI Symptoms

Below is a comparison chart of some of the most common UTI symptoms found in a person with Alzheimer's. UTI symptoms can closely mirror Alzheimer's disease's existing challenges, making it essential to focus not just on their presence, but on how suddenly and severely they emerge. Alzheimer's is a progressive disease, meaning symptoms gradually worsen over time. If sudden changes occur—such as increased confusion, agitation, or incontinence seemingly overnight—it may signal an underlying issue, like a UTI. Recognizing these abrupt shifts can help ensure timely medical intervention, preventing further complications.

Importance of Prompt Intervention and Treatment

Delaying the diagnosis and treatment of a UTI in someone with Alzheimer's can lead to serious complications such as delirium, kidney infections, and sepsis, all of which can result in irreversible decline or even be life-threatening. Early detection and prompt treatment are crucial, as they significantly improve the chances of full recovery or at least reduce lasting damage. Given that Alzheimer's already affects cognitive function, any sudden changes in behavior or mental alertness should be carefully monitored, as they could indicate an underlying infection that requires immediate attention.

Effective UTI treatment depends on factors such as severity and overall health, including the individual's stage of Alzheimer's. The most common approach is oral antibiotics, though IV antibiotics may be needed in severe cases. If a UTI triggers delirium, doctors may prescribe short-term antipsychotic medication, but only when non-drug approaches are ineffective and symptoms cause significant distress.

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If you or someone you care about is experiencing grief related to dementia and need support, we encourage you to visit Alzheimer's Texas or call our [24/7 Helpline at \(512\) 241-0420](tel:5122410420)

Our compassionate team is here to listen, provide resources, and help you navigate this challenging journey.

Alzheimer's Texas
7000 N. MoPac Expy Suite
200
Austin, TX 78731
United States