



# DEMENTIA IN THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT: BACKGROUND

## Signs and symptoms of dementia<sup>1</sup>

- Gradually increasing memory loss
- Confusion
- Unclear thinking, including losing problem-solving skills
- Agitated behavior or delusions
- Becoming lost in formerly familiar circumstances
- Loss of interest in daily or usual activities

## Challenges of Dementia Patients in the ED:<sup>3</sup>

- Fast-paced environment may be stressful or disorienting for those with cognitive impairment
- Persons living with dementia may provide an incomplete medical history
- Increased potential for adverse events: delirium, incontinence, dehydration, wandering, elopement

## Dementia vs. Delirium

"Dementia is a disturbance in intellectual (thinking) functions that is usually progressive over a long period. In contrast, delirium signs and symptoms have a short onset (over a period of hours or days) and change over the course of the day"<sup>2</sup> Delirium can also be superimposed on dementia.

## Stages of Dementia

Recognizing different stages of dementia (e.g., by referencing **FAST**, the Functional Assessment Staging Tool) may inform care decisions. For example, "older individuals who have middle stages of dementia may have difficulty with performing tasks or confuse their words" but can "still recall significant details of their life,"<sup>4</sup> including potentially relevant medical history elements. Advanced stages of dementia may present with illnesses related to the disease progression, such as pneumonia, behavioral symptoms, or difficulty swallowing.

1. Torpy JM, Lynn C, Glass RM. Dementia. *JAMA*. 2010;304(17):1972-1972.

2. Torpy JM, Burke AE, Glass RM. Delirium. *JAMA*. 2010;304(7):814-814.

3. Clevenger, C.K. "The Special Case of Dementia in the ED". PPT slide available at <https://slideplayer.com/slide/5854258/>

4. Malone, M. Nuances of helping older patients with moderate dementia in the Emergency Department. *Advocate Aurora Health Geriatric Emergency Department Newsletter*. 2019.