

What is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive neurodegenerative condition that causes dementia by slowly killing nerve cells in the brain. It gradually destroys a person's memory and ability to learn, reason, make judgments, communicate, and carry out daily activities. First identified in 1907 by the German physician Alois Alzheimer, the illness afflicts about 4 million Americans. At least one in 20 adults aged 65 and older suffers from the disease.

Alzheimer's disease is one of the most common forms of dementia, a group of conditions that slowly destroys brain cells and leads to a decline in mental function.

Symptoms

People suffering from Alzheimer's disease first develop subtle personality changes and memory loss that differs from normal age-related memory problems. They seem to tire or become upset or anxious more easily. They do not cope well with change. For example, they can follow familiar routes but traveling to a new place confuses them and they easily become lost.

In the early stages of the illness, people with Alzheimer's disease are particularly susceptible to depression. Their condition also may be aggravated by reactions to medications or an unsuitable living environment, and the erosion of their intimate relationships may increase their suffering.

Later, memory loss worsens and Alzheimer's disease patients may repeatedly ask the same questions. Decision making becomes impaired, and often they become angry when family members try to help. Driving becomes more dangerous because they cannot react quickly or appropriately. At this stage, people with Alzheimer's disease begin to forget the names of longtime friends. Social life becomes more difficult, and they may become more isolated. Dementia also becomes more apparent in this stage.

In later stages, people with Alzheimer's disease begin to lose physical coordination and may need help with dressing and bathing. They often cannot identify family and friends, although they may still smile, laugh, and enjoy company. Physical impairments can increase until walking is greatly impaired. Eventually, Alzheimer's disease patients completely lose touch with reality and require constant care.

Other Dementias

Anyone who suspects a loved one may be suffering from Alzheimer's disease should consider that the symptoms may also be a sign of a potentially reversible or treatable dementia. Many other illnesses mimic Alzheimer's disease. Physicians must rule out these potentially treatable conditions before diagnosing Alzheimer's disease:

- * **Depression**
- * **Reactions to medications or drug interactions**
- * **Chemical imbalances caused by poor nutrition or illnesses, including pernicious anemia (vitamin B12 deficiency), diabetes, imbalances of sodium or calcium, or thyroid conditions**
- * **Impaired circulation that deprives the brain of adequate amounts of nutrition or oxygen**

Not all dementias are caused by Alzheimer's disease. Brain damage caused by impaired circulation causes between 12 and 20 percent of dementia in older people. Other conditions, including frontal temporal dementia, Lewy body dementia, Parkinson's disease, Huntington's disease, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease also cause progressive dementia.

Check-list of Alzheimer's Disease Symptoms

- * **Impairment of short-term and long-term memory**
- * **Impaired judgment**
- * **Aphasia (impairment of language or inability to produce or understand language as a result of brain damage caused by injury or disease)**
- * **Apraxia (inability to sequence skilled movements to complete a motor task)**
- * **Loss of spatial abilities (impaired ability to judge shapes and sizes and the relationship of objects in space)**
- * **Personality and behavior problems may develop (rapid mood swings for no apparent reason, inappropriate jocularity, or extreme quietness)**
- * **Apathy (passive behavior, sleeping more than usual, or not wanting to do usual activities)**
- * **Loss of ability to learn new information**

- * **Loss of ability to orient themselves to time and place (getting lost in familiar places)**
- * **Possible hallucinations and delusions in later stages**

The presence of any or all of these symptoms is not a sure indicator of Alzheimer's disease; a complete examination by a physician is required.

Diagnosis

Alzheimer's disease research has established that those with the disease develop characteristic microscopic changes in the brain called plaques and neurofibrillary tangles. Because plaques or tangles develop deep within the brain, doctors do not normally test for them. As a result, physicians must carefully review a person's symptoms and take a thorough medical history to correctly diagnose Alzheimer's disease.

Even though scientists do not fully understand how Alzheimer's disease begins and what causes its symptoms, patients and their loved ones can do much to cope with the illness and its effects.

Choosing a Physician

When there is a concern of Alzheimer's disease, the first choice for most patients is to consult with a psychiatrist. A psychiatrist also can identify and treat major depression, an illness that is common among Alzheimer's disease patients and their families. If unrecognized and untreated, depression can mimic or intensify other problems. A psychiatrist can modify treatment to meet each individual's needs.

Counseling and Support

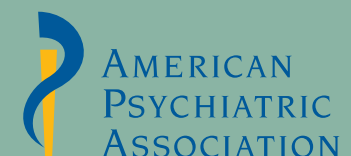
Psychiatric medications are not the only treatments for Alzheimer's disease. Patients and families also may need the help of support groups and counseling. Families especially can benefit from counseling. Therapy can help family members learn ways to help their relative living with Alzheimer's disease manage their illness. They also can learn coping skills to lessen the stress of caring for a relative with Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's Disease

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ISBN 978-0-89042-420-9
9 780890 424209

By taking advantage of group support and psychotherapy, patients and their loved ones can prepare themselves for the disease and its progression. With a solid understanding of the illness, the patients and their loved ones can cope more effectively with the symptoms and avoid some of the complications that come with the disease's later stages. Patients can live productive and fulfilling lives with proper diagnosis and intervention.

Resources

For more information, please contact:

American Psychiatric Association (APA)

1000 Wilson Blvd.
Suite 1825
Arlington, VA 22209
703-907-7300
www.healthyminds.org

American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry (AAGP)

7910 Woodmont Ave.
Suite 1050
Bethesda, MD 20814-3004
301-654-7850
www.aagponline.org

Alzheimer's Disease Education & Referral Center (ADEAR)

P.O. Box 8250
Silver Spring, MD 20907
800-438-4380
www.alzheimers.org

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

Colonial Place Three
2107 Wilson Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201
703-524-7600
Information Helpline:
800-950-NAMI (6264)
www.nami.org

Mental Health America (formerly NMHA)

2000 N. Beauregard Street
6th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
800-969-NMHA (6642)
www.nmha.org

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