

Alzheimer's Disease

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Alzheimer's Disease & Your Health

If you spend any time around older people—family members, friends or co-workers—it's likely you know someone with Alzheimer's disease. The most common cause of dementia, Alzheimer's disease affects an estimated 4.5 million Americans. That figure is expected to increase significantly as the overall population gets older.

memory-related tasks, such as writing checks or taking the bus. By the end, they “forget” how to use the toilet, eat or even walk.

Memory loss, however, is just one symptom. People with Alzheimer's disease often show significant personality changes or act inappropriately as the disease progresses. They may have mood changes, including depression. In the middle stages of the disease, they may become agitated and/or aggressive.

Diagnosing Alzheimer's Disease

The Alzheimer's Association lists 10 warning signs of Alzheimer's disease:

1. memory loss
2. difficulty performing familiar tasks
3. language problems
4. disorientation to time and place
5. poor or decreased judgment
6. problems with abstract thinking
7. misplacing things
8. changes in mood or behavior
9. changes in personality
10. loss of initiative

Still, diagnosing Alzheimer's disease can be difficult. But physicians are now using memory tests and taking pictures of the brain using an MRI or PET scan to improve the accuracy of Alzheimer's disease diagnoses.

A good way to make sure you get the right diagnosis is to seek help at centers devoted to memory problems. At least try to find a physician who specializes in age-related disorders. If you think you or someone in your family has Alzheimer's disease, get a complete medical workup, including brain scans and blood work to rule out other causes of dementia. More than 150 medical conditions, some temporary, can cause dementia.

Questions to Ask Your Health Care Professional

1. Do you treat people with Alzheimer's disease? If not, can you recommend a specialist?
2. Which tests will be performed and what can I, or the person I'm worried about, expect to experience during those tests?
3. How quickly will the test results be available?
4. How can you be sure the problems I'm experiencing are really Alzheimer's and not just part of the normal aging process?
5. What behavioral and mental changes can I expect over time? How quickly will these changes occur?
6. What treatments are available for these symptoms? What side effects are likely?
7. Do you suggest changes in immediate surroundings or activities that could relieve some of the symptoms?
8. Do you recommend any alternative treatments, such as vitamin E supplements or ginkgo biloba?
9. Are there any local clinical trials you recommend?
10. Is there a caregiver support group in this area?

Alzheimer's Disease Basics

Although researchers don't know for sure what causes Alzheimer's disease, most believe it is related to problems with how the brain processes otherwise normal proteins. For some reason, later in life these proteins begin to form lesions in the brains of some individuals. These lesions, also referred to as “tangles” and “plaques,” start to destroy parts of the brain.

There are two forms of Alzheimer's disease. In the familial form, genes directly cause the disease. Most cases of familial Alzheimer's disease, also called “early onset Alzheimer's disease,” occur before age 60. This form, however, affects less than five percent of those with Alzheimer's disease.

The majority of people with the disease are diagnosed after age 65. They have the “sporadic” form of the disease. In this form, genes may influence your risk of developing the disease, but environmental factors may also play a role.

A growing body of research links the risk of Alzheimer's disease with overall health. These studies find that having high cholesterol or high blood pressure levels, being overweight, getting little exercise and eating an unhealthy diet can increase your risk of getting the disease.

Eventual Course of Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is progressive—its symptoms get worse and its victims become more disabled over time. In the beginning, individuals may have problems with simple

Resources

Alzheimer's Association

225 N. Michigan Avenue, Floor 17
Chicago, IL 60601-7633
1-800-272-3900

www.alz.org

Offers information for patients, families and researchers to heighten public awareness, provide support, aid research efforts and advocate for legislation responsive to Alzheimer's disease.

The Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

PO Box 8250
Silver Spring, MD 20907-8250
1-800-438-4380

www.alzheimers.org

Provides up-to-date information about Alzheimer's disease and related disorders to patients and their families, caregivers, health care providers and the public; part of the National Institute on Aging.

Alzheimer's Foundation of America

322 8th Avenue, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10001
1-866-232-8484

www.alzfdn.org

Presents services for patients and families dealing with Alzheimer's. Counseling by social workers and other professionals includes referrals to other Alzheimer's-related resources.

Family Caregiver Alliance

180 Montgomery Street, Suite 1100
San Francisco, CA 94104
1-800-445-8106

www.caregiver.org

Addresses the needs of families and friends providing long-term care at home. FCA offers programs at national, state and local levels.

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Treating Alzheimer's Disease

Five drugs have been approved to treat Alzheimer's disease and more are being developed. However, the drugs currently available only temporarily stabilize or slow the progression of the disease; they do not cure or reverse it.

Four of the drugs—donepezil (Aricept), rivastigmine (Exelon), galantamine (Razadyne) and tacrine (Cognex), which is now rarely prescribed—are known as cholinesterase inhibitors. These drugs work by increasing the amount of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine in the brain. Acetylcholine helps brain cells communicate. The drugs seem to work best when prescribed early in the disease.

The newest drug, memantine (Namenda), is the first available for those individuals with moderate to severe Alzheimer's disease. It works on a different neurotransmitter called glutamate.

Other drugs being studied prevent the formation of the brain-robbing plaques and tangles. Researchers also are developing vaccines that destroy the plaques after they have formed.

Caring for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease

Women usually are the primary caregivers for those with Alzheimer's disease. In fact, the typical caregiver for someone with the disease is a 46-year-old married woman who works outside the home. Overall, she spends as much as 50 percent more time giving care than male caregivers, providing an estimated \$148 billion to \$188 billion in unpaid care every year.

This can have a significant affect on a woman's health. Studies find that middle-aged and older women who provide care for an ill or disabled spouse are six times as likely to suffer symptoms of depression or anxiety as those who have no caregiving responsibilities.

Other possible health effects include:

- Weakened immune system
- Higher risk of cardiovascular disease
- Higher risk of high blood pressure

Women caregivers also have a risk of dying earlier, studies find. That may be related to the effects of constant stress on their health, the fact that they don't take care of their own health, or because the caregiving may worsen an existing illness. The effects of caregiving on a woman's health may continue for months or even years after she stops caring for the person with Alzheimer's disease.

There are ways to manage the stress of caregiving. These include joining support groups, getting regular physical activity, structuring daily routines, accepting help from friends and family and looking for respite-care resources in your community.

Additionally, simply learning to accept your own and your loved one's limitations can help you cope. For instance, accept that your husband will never be able to drive again but celebrate that he can still share a meal with you.

Fact Sheet: About Genes and Alzheimer's Disease. Alzheimer's Association. October 13, 2004. <http://www.alz.org/Resources>.

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