

Alzheimer's Disease

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Alzheimer's disease is a progressive neurological condition. It affects the part of your brain that controls thought, memory, reason, judgment and language. It is the most common dementia (condition that affects the way your brain works) in older people.

The disease usually affects people older than age 65. About 4 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's causes many changes to take place in your brain:

- abnormal clumps or deposits
- tangled bundles of fibers
- loss of nerve cells that are connected to memory
- lower levels of chemicals that carry messages among nerve cells.

The cause of Alzheimer's is unknown. There may be links to age, family history, education level, metals and even viruses.

There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease. As the disease gets worse, everyday help from family members or friends becomes very important.

Alzheimer's can last a few years to more than 20 years.

Signs of Alzheimer's Disease

A key sign of Alzheimer's disease is memory loss. This type of memory loss is not the occasional memory lapse everyone has from time to time (forgetting a name or date). Memory loss from Alzheimer's makes everyday tasks difficult to impossible to complete.

Alzheimer's disease starts slowly. As the disease gets worse, the signs include:

- having trouble with short-term memory (recalling recent events or family members' names)
- getting confused or disoriented in familiar places
- having trouble doing simple math problems
- losing your speech
- losing your appetite
- having trouble doing things in steps (like recipes)
- having trouble doing simple tasks (such as combing hair)
- being unable to think clearly
- losing interest in things you enjoy
- asking the same question over and over
- forgetting how to do routine tasks
- having problems speaking, reading, writing or understanding
- having a change in your personality

(over)

- having sleep problems
- having trouble recognizing family members.

In some cases, people with Alzheimer's may wander from home or become anxious or aggressive.

Diagnosing Alzheimer's Disease

The presence of Alzheimer's disease is confirmed by tests of brain tissue. Since it can be dangerous to remove living brain tissue, doctors look at a person's symptoms to determine if someone has "probable" Alzheimer's disease.

If you are having memory problems, your health care provider may:

- take your complete medical history
- test your blood and urine
- test your memory, attention span, and counting, language and problem-solving skills
- order a brain scan.

Brain scans are safe. They let your health care provider look at special pictures of your brain. He or she can tell if there is anything abnormal that might be causing your memory loss.

You may have a computerized tomography (CT or CAT) scan or a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan. A CT scan uses X-ray and a computer for an in-depth look at your brain. An MRI scan uses a magnetic field to show your brain with greater depth than X-rays.

Treating Alzheimer's Disease

There is currently no treatment for Alzheimer's disease. Talk with your health care provider about which medicines may help ease some of your symptoms (such as depression, sleep problems or anxiety).

See your health care provider on a regular basis so he or she can monitor your condition. Your provider can also give you and your family resources for support or care.

Information adapted from the National Institute on Aging of the National Institutes of Health.