

Recognizing Alzheimer's

Although the most common form of dementia, this disease affects every patient and caregiver differently

While we all might forget an actor's name or maybe misplace our sunglasses, forgetfulness along with marked confusion or changes in behavior is serious, and it should be shared with a healthcare provider right away.

Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia. It is a terminal disease that causes the deterioration of brain tissue leading to severe loss of memory, confusion and eventually death.

More than 5.4 million people in the U.S. have the disease. About 15% of U.S. adults get Alzheimer's before age 65, and about 45% after age 85. It is the sixth leading cause of death in America. In 2010, Alzheimer's was the underlying cause for nearly 83,500 deaths and a contributing factor in 26,488 deaths. Between 2000 and 2010 the number of people who died from Alzheimer's grew 39%.

Signs & Symptoms

According to the Alzheimer's Association, there are 10 warning signs of dementia:

1. Memory loss that disrupts daily life
2. Challenges in planning or solving problems
3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure
4. Confusion with time or place
5. Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
6. New problems with words in speaking or writing
7. Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
8. Decreased or poor judgment
9. Withdrawal from work or social activities
10. Changes in mood and personality

The National Institute on Aging adds that someone with Alzheimer's disease may experience one or more of the following symptoms:

- getting lost;
- trouble handling money and paying bills;
- repeating questions;
- taking longer to complete normal daily tasks
- poor judgment;

- losing things or misplacing them in odd places;
- difficulty remembering newly learned information;
- unfounded suspicions about family, friends and professional caregivers; and
- difficulty speaking, swallowing and walking.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis of Alzheimer's most often begins with a mental status test. The mini-mental state exam and the mini-cog test are the two most common tests. These tests help healthcare providers tell if a person is having serious trouble with memory and whether they can solve simple problems like repeating a short list of words or drawing a clock face that reads 3 p.m. on a piece of paper.

Along with the mental status tests, your healthcare provider needs to get a sense of a patient's overall well-being and general mood. This is important because depression and anxiety can cause memory and behavior problems similar to Alzheimer's. Your healthcare provider may also order special imaging tests to rule out other conditions that may cause symptoms similar to dementia, such as brain tumors and strokes.

While Alzheimer's affects every patient differently, the disease has seven distinct stages:

- Stage 1: No impairment
- Stage 2: Very mild decline (losing keys; forgetting familiar names)
- Stage 3: Mild decline (memory and concentration problems)
- Stage 4: Moderate decline (difficulty planning dinner or paying bills on time)
- Stage 5: Moderately severe decline (unable to recall events or remember important dates like birthdays, anniversaries, etc.)
- Stage 6: Severe decline (need help to get dressed;

personality begins to change)

Stage 7: Very severe decline (late-stage Alzheimer's: trouble eating, swallowing, speaking and all motor function)

Treatment

Although researchers continue to look for a cure, Alzheimer's treatment is mostly limited to managing the many symptoms. The increasing ability of healthcare providers to spot and treat the disease early on, however, is improving the quality of life for many patients.

The Alzheimer's Association estimates as much as 95% of what we know about dementia has been learned in just the past 15 years. Many point to recent discoveries of human genes tied to the disease, which could lead to more targeted interventions in the earliest stages. A few FDA-approved drugs for treating dementia have been shown to improve thinking, while a combination of drugs may help some patients delay the worst symptoms.

Unfortunately, by the time a person is diagnosed with symptoms of Alzheimer's it is typically too late to slow the progression of the disease very much. There is no magic bullet.

If you or a loved one has been diagnosed with dementia there are many resources available, such as those offered by local chapters of the Alzheimer's Association; its web site: www.alz.org; and 24/7 telephone helpline at 800-272-3900.

Resources

Know the 10 Signs: Early Detection Matters. Alzheimer's Association web site. http://www.alz.org/national/documents/checklist_10signs.pdf

Seven Stages of Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's Association web site. http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_stages_of_alzheimers.asp?type=alz

Tests for Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia. Alzheimer's Association web site. http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_steps_to_diagnosis.asp#mmse

Alzheimer's Disease. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention web site. <http://www.cdc.gov/features/alzheimers/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2013, March). Mortality From Alzheimer's Disease in the United States: Data for 2000 and 2010. NCHS Data Brief No. 116. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db116.htm>

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