

MANAGING YOUR ALZHEIMER DISEASE

What Is Alzheimer Disease?

Dementia is a serious brain disorder that affects a person's ability to carry out daily activities.

Alzheimer disease (AD) is the most common type of dementia among older people. It is a slow disease, starting with mild memory problems and ending with severe brain damage. It affects memory, thinking, and language.

The course of the disease and how fast changes occur vary from person to person. AD is usually not inherited but risk increases if there is a family history.

What Causes Alzheimer Disease?

The cause remains unknown. In AD, brain cells that store and process information begin to fail and die. Also, more abnormal proteins are made, which form clumps and tangles around and inside these cells.

What Are the Symptoms of Alzheimer Disease?

The first symptom is usually increased forgetfulness. People forget names or where they put things. However, some forgetfulness is normal with aging; not everyone with these symptoms has AD or dementia.

Later, memory and thinking problems grow. People forget recent events and names of familiar people or objects, ask the same question or tell the same story over and over, and have trouble organizing everyday life (e.g., paying bills).

In middle and later stages of AD, people need help with everyday activities. Eventually they need total care. People become unable to get dressed, lose awareness of events, become easily

disoriented or anxious, get lost, show emotional and personality changes, and have greater physical disability.

How Is Alzheimer Disease Diagnosed?

No one test can show whether someone has AD. The health care provider will diagnose it by checking general health, medical history, and mental abilities. The health care provider will ask questions about a person's own life and wider world. The health care provider may also test reasoning, hand-to-eye coordination, balance, and sensation, as well as look for depression. A brain scan may show other causes of dementia. Blood tests may be done to look for other disorders that can affect memory such as an underactive thyroid or vitamin B12 deficiency.

How Is Alzheimer Disease Treated?

There is no cure. Drugs can sometimes slow the worsening of symptoms. These drugs include cholinesterase inhibitors such as donepezil and memantine. Other medicines can help anxiety, depression, agitation, behavior problems, or psychotic symptoms.

People with AD have trouble adapting to changing living environments. Printing information that is often forgotten and putting it around the home can help. A medical alert bracelet or tag giving the home address helps people who get lost.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Alzheimer Disease

- ✓ **DO** find out about help and support.
- ✓ **DO** try to simplify daily routines and living spaces.

- ✓ **DO** think about home safety. Change objects or situations that could be dangerous (e.g., add handrails or door locks).
- ✓ **DO** join a support group.
- ✓ **DO** keep socially, physically, and mentally active. Understand that nursing home care will be likely.
- ✓ **DO** wear an identification band.
- ✓ **DO** arrange for breaks for caregivers.
- ✓ **DO** call the health care provider if you have sudden marked worsening of symptoms, new health issues, or problems with medicines.
- ⊗ **DON'T** assume that you have AD. Mental changes have many causes that are reversible or treatable.
- ⊗ **DON'T** change your living environments any more than absolutely necessary.

Unfamiliar experiences and confusing environments are hard to handle and often cause anxiety.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

- Alzheimer's Association: Tel: (800) 272-3900 (24-hour helpline); Website:
<http://www.alz.org>
- Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center: Tel: (800) 438-4380; Website:
<http://www.alzheimers.org>
- The Alzheimer's Foundation of America: Tel: (866) 232-8484; Website:
<http://www.alzfdn.org>

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