

# Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is often difficult to distinguish because the early signs of it closely resemble the natural signs of aging.

## What is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's is a disease of the brain that gradually destroys the ability to remember, reason, imagine and learn. The condition progresses over time.

There are 100 billion nerve cells in the brain. Each of these cells joins with others to form "communication networks." Alzheimer's disease prevents some of these cells from operating correctly, although scientists are unsure why. As the damage spreads, the cells cannot function and eventually die.

During normal aging, most people's brains develop what are known as *plaques* (deposits of a protein fragment) and *tangles* (fibers of another protein). It has been discovered during autopsy that people suffering from Alzheimer's have a lot more plaques and tangles than others. Scientists believe that these may play a role in blocking nerve cell communication.

## Risk Factors

Some risk factors for Alzheimer's include:

- Increasing age
- Family history and genetics
- Being of African-American or Latino descent
- Serious head injury

## Symptoms

The Alzheimer's Association identifies 10 warning signs of Alzheimer's disease to watch for:

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Challenges in solving problems
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images or spatial relationships
- Trouble speaking or writing
- Misplacing things
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood or personality

## Diagnosis and Treatment

The first step is to take the person you are concerned about to a physician. There is no specific type of doctor for this disease, but in some cases you may be referred to a specialist such as a neurologist or psychologist. Your local Alzheimer's Association chapter can assist you in locating the proper physician.

At the doctor's office, the patient will undergo a physical exam, diagnostic testing and a neurological exam. If diagnosed with Alzheimer's, the patient will likely be prescribed a

cholinesterase inhibitor and/or memantine. Taking vitamin E may also be recommended.

## Prevention

Research shows that keeping the brain healthy may help prevent Alzheimer's. Take the following steps:

- Eat a healthy diet.
- Stay socially active.
- Avoid tobacco and excessive alcohol.
- Exercise.
- Stimulate the brain with activities such as logic or word puzzles.

## Support

Alzheimer's disease is devastating for both the patient and his or her loved ones. It can be especially difficult for the primary caretaker, so it is important to have a network of family and friends to lend a hand.



## Did You Know...?

According to the Alzheimer's Association, there are about 5.4 million people living with Alzheimer's. By 2050, that number could possibly reach 16 million. With one in eight older Americans suffering from this disease, it is the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States—the only one that cannot be prevented, cured or even slowed.