

Alzheimer Disease

What is Alzheimer disease?

Alzheimer (ALTZ-hi-mer) disease is a condition that affects the brain. It is the most common cause of dementia, which is a loss of brain function that can affect memory, attention, language, and problem solving. It is not completely clear what causes Alzheimer disease. Some people who get it have lower amounts of a certain brain chemical. They also may have proteins that build up in brain cells. These changes may cause brain cells to stop working normally. Alzheimer disease gets worse over time.

What are the stages?

In the early stages, memory loss is mild and people may lose interest in parts of their lives. They may have difficulty performing daily activities like cooking, bathing, dressing, or managing money. Some may be sad or nervous, or get upset easily. As the disease progresses, memory loss and language skills get worse, and people may not be able to care for themselves. In advanced stages, people can't communicate with others or respond to their environment. They become completely dependent on caregivers. People with Alzheimer disease live an average of seven to eight years after their symptoms become noticeable, depending on their age and other health conditions.

How is it diagnosed?

A doctor can assess people for Alzheimer disease by asking questions, doing a physical exam, and ordering tests. When a diagnosis is made, it is important to think about things such as lifestyle, caregiving, and end-of-life issues. Talk to your doctor about these things if you or a loved one is diagnosed.

How is it treated?

There is no cure, but some medicines may help slow the rate of disease. However, the benefit of these medicines is small, and some people may not benefit at all. None of the medicines will reverse the disease or stop it from getting worse.

Can it be prevented?

There is little evidence that any medicines or supplements can reduce the risk of getting Alzheimer disease.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

Web site: <http://familydoctor.org/044>

Alzheimer's Association

Web site: <http://www.alz.org>

Family Caregiver Alliance

Web site: <http://www.caregiver.org>

June 2011

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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