

Alzheimer's Disease

What is Alzheimer's?

Alzheimer's Disease (AD) is the most common cause of dementia in older people. A dementia is a medical condition that disrupts the way the brain works. AD affects the parts of the brain that control thought, memory, and language. Although the risk of getting the disease increases with age, it is not a normal part of aging. At present the cause of the disease is unknown and there is no cure.

AD is named after Dr. Alois Alzheimer, a German psychiatrist. In 1906, Dr. Alzheimer described changes in the brain tissue of a woman who had died of an unusual mental illness. He found abnormal deposits (now called senile or neuritic plaques) and tangled bundles of nerve fibers (now called neurofibrillary tangles). These plaques and tangles in the brain have come to be characteristic brain changes due to AD.

Symptoms Include:

- Initial mild forgetfulness
- Confusion with names and simple mathematical problems
- Forgetfulness to do simple everyday tasks, i.e., brushing their teeth
- Problems speaking, understanding, reading and writing
- Behavioral and personality changes
- Aggressive, anxious, or aimless behavior

Statistics

It is estimated that currently 4 million people in the United States may have Alzheimer's disease. The disease usually begins after age 65 and risk of AD goes up with age. While younger people may have AD, it is much less common. About 3% of men and women ages 65-74 have AD and nearly half of those over age 85 could have the disease.

Diagnosis

No definitive test to diagnose Alzheimer's disease in living patients exists. However, in specialized research facilities, neurologists now can diagnose AD with up to 90% accuracy. The following is some of the information used to make this diagnosis:

- A complete medical history
- Basic medical tests (i.e., blood, urine tests)
- Neuropsychological tests (i.e., memory, problem-solving, language tests)
- Brain scans (i.e., MRI scan, CT scan or PET scan)

Research for Possible Risk Factors

Scientists are trying to learn what causes AD and how to prevent it. This list may not be all inclusive or definite. However, research has lead scientists to consider these as possible risk factors:



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- Genetic factors
- Environmental factors - aluminum, zinc, and other metals have been detected in the brain tissue of those with AD. However, it isn't known whether they cause AD, or build up in the brain as a result of AD.
- Viruses - Viruses that might cause the changes seen in the brain tissue of AD patients are being studied.

The only known risk factors are age and family history. Serious head injury and lower levels of education may also be risk factors. AD is probably not caused by any one factor. Most likely, it is several factors together that react differently in each person. Unfortunately, no blood or urine test currently exists that can detect or predict AD.

Treatment

Alzheimer's disease advances in stages, ranging from mild forgetfulness to severe dementia. The course of the disease and the rate of decline varies from person to person. The duration from onset of symptoms to death can be from 5 to 20 years.

Currently, there is no effective treatment for AD that can halt the progression. However, some experimental drugs have shown promise in easing symptoms in some patients. Medications can help control behavioral symptoms; making patients more comfortable and easier to manage for caregivers. Still other research efforts focus on alternative care programs that provide relief to the caregiver and support for the patient.

Other Resources

Alzheimer's Association: (800) 272-3900
Website: www.alz.org

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center: (800) 438-4380
www.alzheimers.org or www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers

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