

Alzheimer's Disease



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Introduction

The origin of the term Alzheimer's disease dates back to 1906 when Dr. Alois Alzheimer, a German physician, presented a case history before a medical meeting of a 51-year-old woman who suffered from a rare brain disorder. A brain autopsy identified the plaques and tangles that today characterize Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, degenerative disorder that attacks the brain's nerve cells, or neurons, resulting in loss of memory, thinking and language skills, and behavioral changes. These neurons, which produce the brain chemical, or neurotransmitter, acetylcholine, break connections with other nerve cells and ultimately die.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia, or loss of intellectual function, among people aged 65 and older.

Alzheimer's disease is not a normal part of aging.

Overview and Facts

It is estimated that 10% of all people over the age of 65 have Alzheimer disease and 50% of people over the age of 85 have it. It is also known that the number of people with the disease doubles every 5 years beyond age 65. It was also found that activities such as reading, playing board games, playing musical instruments and dancing are associated with a reduced risk of dementia.

Symptoms

The 10 warning signs of Alzheimer's disease include:

1. Memory loss
2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks
3. Problems with language
4. Disorientation to time and place
5. Poor or decreased judgment
6. Problems with abstract thinking
7. Misplacing things
8. Changes in mood or behavior
9. Changes in personality
10. Loss of initiative

Causes and Risk Factors

Factors that may increase the risk for Alzheimer's disease include:

- **Age:** the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease increases with age.
- **Gender:** women are affected more frequently than men.
- **Family History:** fewer than 1% of people with Alzheimer's disease inherited the condition.
- **Down syndrome:** people with Down syndrome often develop Alzheimer's disease at age 30 to 40.

- **Environmental toxins:** some studies have shown that environmental toxins may increase the susceptibility to Alzheimer's disease.
- **Low educational level:** for reasons that are still unknown, some studies have shown that low educational levels can be related to an increased risk for Alzheimer's disease.
- **Other Factors:** research has also related high cholesterol and high blood pressure to an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease.

Test and Diagnosis

To diagnose Alzheimer's disease, a person should consult a mental health professional who will rely on scientific criteria to check whether he/she has this condition. The doctor will perform a full examination including a mental health assessment. The Mini Mental Status Exam is a very brief test that the physician uses to test a person's solving skills, attention span and memory.

Also, lab tests (Complete blood count, liver function tests, vitamin B12 concentration, thyroid function tests, etc...) can be ordered to rule out other conditions, that can cause similar symptoms. Brain imaging tests such as a CT head scan or a brain MRI may be done as well.

Treatment

Treatment of Alzheimer's disease involves treatment of the condition and the related conditions. The treatment consists of medications and therapy.

1. Medications include: cholinesterase inhibitors curb the breakdown of acetylcholine, a chemical in the brain important for memory and learning. These types of medications help increase the levels of acetylcholine in the brain. This medication slows the progression of the symptoms. Another medicine called memantine may be used alone or with cholinesterase inhibitors to treat moderate to severe symptoms. Other medications can be used as well to treat depression, anxiety, and sleeping problems related to Alzheimer's disease.

2. Psychotherapy is also helpful for people with Alzheimer's disease and helps them cope with their condition.

Patients and caregivers can find more information about Alzheimer's disease and its treatment below. You can click on each title for information:

- 10 Warning signs of Alzheimer's | AR | FR
- I have Alzheimer's | AR
- Taking Medications Safely | AR | FR
- Safety at Home | AR | FR
- Activities at Home | AR | FR
- Bathing | AR | FR
- Behaviors | AR | FR
- Communication | AR | FR
- Dressing | AR | FR
- Eating | AR | FR
- Grief | AR | FR

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Sources and Links

www.idraac.org
www.webmd.com
www.alzfdn.org