

Alzheimer's disease

Patient education

What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease is a neurodegenerative disorder that affects memory, thinking, language, and/or behaviour. Alzheimer's disease causes a decline in mental abilities that clearly affects daily function, and the disease gradually progresses over time. Alzheimer's is the most common type of dementia.

What are the causes?

- Several contributors: protein called beta-amyloid forms deposits in the brain; tangles of brain fibres (neurofibrillary tangles), and changes in levels of certain neurotransmitters
- The root causes of the above changes are not clearly known
- Can rarely be caused by a gene mutation inherited from one or both parents

What increases the risks?

- Older age
- Family history of dementia
- Brain injury
- Heart or blood vessel disease
- Prior stroke
- High blood pressure or high cholesterol
- Diabetes

How do I know that I have Alzheimer's disease?

- You should see your doctor to discuss your concerns and have a thorough assessment including clinical testing, blood tests, and sometimes a brain scan
- The disease progresses slowly and we encourage families and individuals to focus on positive attributes and abilities rather than limitations that the disease creates
- For those with known, diagnosed Alzheimer's Disease, there are several stages:

Early Stage

- Difficulty performing familiar tasks
- Clear, noticeable changes to family, friends, or clinicians

Moderate Stage

- Increasing difficulty communicating and expressing thoughts
- Some difficulty recognizing extended family or friends
- Increasing functional dependence for some daily activities such as toileting, dressing

Severe Stage

- Require full support for most daily activities
- Significant deficits in communicating needs
- Difficulty mobilizing
- Loss of control of bowel and/or bladder function

How is this treated?

At this time, there is no treatment to cure Alzheimer's disease or stop it completely. The goals of treatment are:

- To manage behavioural changes and, if possible, to slow the progression of the disease's symptoms
- To assist you and your caregivers in managing day-to-day life

The following treatment options are available:

- Medicines may aid in slowing down cognitive changes - speak to your doctor about whether these may be right for you
- There are other medications that can be used if there are significant behavioural concerns
- Other non-medication based treatments (mental and physical activity, a healthy and balanced diet, socializing) are very important for all individuals
- Cognitive therapy offers education, support, and memory aids (most beneficial during early stages)
- Counseling and guidance can assist you in dealing with a wide range of emotions including anger, relief, fear, and isolation
- Support groups provide family members with further education and support

If you have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, please contact your doctor or health care provider immediately if you are experiencing any of the following:

- You or a member of your family becomes concerned about your safety
- There is a sudden change in cognitive abilities

If you have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, please get help immediately at your local Emergency Department if you are experiencing any of the following:

- There is danger to yourself or others due to behaviours associated with the dementia
- There are serious thoughts of self-harm or attempts to harm oneself or others

Where can I get more information?

Alzheimer Society of Canada

Website: alzheimer.ca/en

Reference: Alzheimer's Disease. (2021, May 27). Elsevier Inc: ClinicalKey for Nursing.
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