

Alzheimer's disease (AD)

About 6.7 million persons older than 65 in the U.S. have Alzheimer's disease (AD). It is the most common cause of dementia – a broad term that means cognitive function declines enough to interfere with daily life activities.

Alzheimer's disease has a gradual onset. How quickly signs and symptoms occur and progress varies from person to person.



SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- Memory changes that disrupt daily life. Persons with AD forget important dates, events, and/or information. They may also ask the same question over and over.
- Problems doing familiar tasks. Persons with AD may have a hard time fixing a meal or driving to a familiar place.
- New problems speaking or writing. Often forget simple words or phrases or use unusual words for things.
- Problems with visual images and spatial relationships. May have problems with reading, color and contrast, and judging distance.
- Problems with planning and/or solving problems. Persons with AD have trouble making and following plans. They have trouble working with numbers, such as balancing a checkbook.
- Problems with awareness of time and place. May forget where they are, how they got there, and how to get back home. They may lose track of dates and seasons.
- Poor or decreased judgment. Neglect daily grooming and may not dress right for the weather. They show poor judgment about money.
- Misplacing things and can not retrace their steps to find them. They put things in unusual places, such as a wristwatch in a sugar bowl.
- Changes in mood or personality. Can get very confused, depressed, fearful, and worried. They rely on someone else to make decisions for them.
- Withdrawal from social activities and work. Get less involved with hobbies, social events, sports, and work.



CAUSES

With AD, certain protein deposits (plaques) and twisted fibers (tangles) build up in the brain. Over time, this causes large numbers of nerve cells in the brain to die.

Risk factors for AD are getting older and a family history of the disease. Having heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, a stroke, or a brain injury may increase the risk. Staying physically and mentally active and eating healthy throughout life may lower the risk for AD.

TREATMENT

A medical diagnosis suggests (or rules out) Alzheimer's disease. Other conditions, such as stroke, tumor, Parkinson's disease, sleep disturbances, and side effects of medication can cause symptoms like AD.

There is no known cure for Alzheimer's disease.

Prescribed medicines may help some persons with mild to moderate AD.



TRIAGE QUESTIONS



Is the person suddenly confused or disoriented? Are they not able to reason or communicate at all?

NO

YES

GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE



Do you have any signs and symptoms of Alzheimer's disease?

NO

YES

SEE DOCTOR



Are any of these conditions present?

- Symptoms in a person with Alzheimer's disease worsen.
- The caretaker of the person with Alzheimer's disease needs care or guidance.

NO

YES

CALL DOCTOR



USE SELF-CARE



SELF-CARE / PREVENTION

There is no known prevention. Studies suggest managing blood pressure, and staying physically, mentally, and socially active. Also, eat a healthy diet rich in fruits, vegetables, beans, grains, olive oil, poultry, and fish.

Good planning, medical care, and social management help both the person and caregivers cope with symptoms and maintain the quality of life for as long as possible. An Advance Directive should be done in the early stages of AD to allow for the person's wishes. It's very helpful to put structure in the life of the person in the early stages of AD.

To do this:

- Maintain daily routines.
- See that the person with AD eats well-balanced meals and stays as active as they can. Activities like going for walks with others are good.
- Post safety signs like "Don't touch." Make "to do" lists of daily tasks.
- Pictures and icons are more useful than notes.
- Put things in their proper places after use. This helps the person find things when he or she needs them.
- Make sure the person carries identification or wears a medical ID bracelet.



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alzheimer's Disease Education
& Referral (ADEAR) Center
800-438-4380
nia.nih.gov/alzheimers

Alzheimer's Association
800-272-3900
alz.org