

Alzheimer's Disease

What is Alzheimer's Disease (AD)?

Dementia is a brain disorder that disrupts the way the brain works. The most common form of dementia among older people is AD, which involves the parts of the brain that control thought, memory, and language.

While scientists do not yet fully understand what causes AD, it is estimated that currently 4 million people in the United States may have the disease. It usually begins after age 65 and the number of sufferers doubles every 5 years beyond 65. AD is less common for younger people.

Possible Risk Factors

The only known risk factors are age and family history. Research indicates that AD is not caused by any one factor, but several factors which are different for each person. The following are two possible risk factors:

- ▶ Genetic: the gene that makes a protein called apolipoprotein (ApoE), which carries cholesterol in the blood, has been shown to increase the risk in some people.
- ▶ Environmental: aluminum, zinc, and other metals have been detected in the brain tissue of AD sufferers. It isn't known whether they cause AD, or build up as a result of the disease.

What Are the Symptoms of AD?

AD begins slowly. At first, the only symptom may be mild forgetfulness. In the early stage of AD, people may have trouble remembering recent events, activities, or the names of familiar people or things. They may not be able to solve simple math problems. People in the middle stages of AD can no longer think clearly and may forget simple tasks like combing their hair. They can fail to recognize familiar people and places and begin to have problems speaking, understanding, reading, or writing. Later on, people with AD may become anxious or aggressive.

How is AD Diagnosed?

An early, accurate diagnosis of AD helps patients and their families plan for the future and offers the best chance to treat the symptoms. Currently, the only definite way to diagnose AD is to find out whether there are abnormal clumps (amyloid plaques) and tangles (neurofibrillary tangles) in the brain tissue. To do this, doctors must perform an autopsy. Therefore, doctors can only make a diagnosis of "possible" or "probable" AD while the person is still alive.

Doctors use several tools to diagnose "probable" AD, including:

- ▶ A person's general health, medical history, and the current ability to carry out daily activities
- ▶ Memory, problem solving, counting and language tests
- ▶ Blood, urine, or spinal fluid tests
- ▶ Brain scans

How is AD Treated?

AD patients live from 8 to 20 years after diagnosis. There is no effective treatment to halt the progression, but medications can help control behavioral symptoms, making patients more comfortable and easier to manage for caregivers.

This information is general. If your doctor tells you something different, follow his or her instructions.

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