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## **Alzheimer's disease**

### **What is Alzheimer's disease?**

Alzheimer's disease is a disease of brain that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills of a person. It may eventually reduce the ability to carry out the simplest tasks. It begins slowly and gets worse over time. It is the commonest type of dementia or memory disorder.

People start forgetting as they grow old. The memory problem that occurs with age is usually not a serious problem. If the memory problem starts interfering with day-today work, then it requires consideration and may be 'more' than the age related problem.

The disease is named after the doctor who described it Alois Alzheimer.

### **What is cause of Alzheimer's disease?**

The exact cause of Alzheimer's disease is not yet known. Like all types of dementia, it is caused by progressive death of cells in the brain. It is a type of neurodegenerative disease, which means there is progressive brain cell death that happens over a course of time. In a patient with Alzheimer's disease certain chemicals in the brain are deficient. This leads to ineffective signal transmission. Over the time some abnormal proteins are accumulated in brain leading to cell death.

Some people may have genes that put them at higher risk for Alzheimer's disease, but the genetic type of Alzheimer's disease is uncommon.

### **What are symptoms of Alzheimer's disease?**

The features of Alzheimer's disease vary from person to person; so not everyone will have the same symptoms. The tempo of disease progression is variable as well. In general, Alzheimer's disease takes many years to develop and becomes increasingly severe over time.

Memory problems are typically one of the first signs of Alzheimer's disease.

A person in the early (mild) stage of Alzheimer's disease may

- Find it hard to remember things
- Ask the same questions over and over
- Get lost in familiar places
- Lose things or put them in odd places
- Have trouble handling money and paying bills
- Take longer than normal to finish daily tasks
- Have some mood and personality changes

As Alzheimer's disease progresses to the moderate stage, memory loss and confusion grow worse, and people may have problems recognizing family members and friends.

Other symptoms at this stage may include

- Difficulty learning new things and coping with new situations
- Trouble carrying out tasks that involve multiple steps, like getting dressed
- Impulsive behavior
- Forgetting the names of common things
- Hallucinations, delusions, or paranoia
- Wandering away from home

As Alzheimer's disease becomes more severe, people lose the ability to communicate. They may sleep more, lose weight, and have trouble swallowing. Often they cannot control their bladder and/or bowels. Eventually, they need total care.

### **How does the doctor diagnose Alzheimer's disease?**

No simple test can diagnose Alzheimer's disease. Specially trained doctors like neurologist can diagnose Alzheimer's disease correctly up to 90 percent of the time.

To diagnose Alzheimer's disease, a doctor may

1. Ask questions about overall health, past medical problems, ability to carry out daily activities, and changes in behavior and personality
2. Conduct tests to measure memory, problem solving, attention, counting, and language skills
3. Carry out certain blood and urine tests
4. Perform brain scans (CT scan and/or MRI) to look for anything in the brain that does not look normal
5. Send you to psychologist who asks many questions as per scales that they use

### **What is the treatment for Alzheimer's disease?**

Some medications are used which help to maintain thinking, memory, and speaking capacities. These medications also help for improvement in these skills. However, since the disease is progressive, the medication effect may not last permanently. The duration of treatment is long, and mostly lifelong. These drugs include

- Donepezil
- Rivastigmine
- Galantamine
- Memantine

Some patients may additionally require medications for depression, sleep problems, restlessness, agitation, loss of urine control etc. If the dietary intake is not good, doctor may add vitamins.

### **How to live with Alzheimer's disease?**

In addition to medications, other changes can help to maintain and improve the quality of life.

Keeping the heart and blood vessels healthy may help slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease. It is important to:

- Control high blood pressure
- Reduce high cholesterol level
- Avoid smoking
- Keep diabetes under control

Physical exercises may benefit both the body and brain of people with Alzheimer's disease. Eating healthy food that includes vegetables and fruits is helpful as well.

Mental exercises can help to hold off symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. The activities which can be done include

- Reading or doing crosswords or number puzzles
- Playing cards or some brain games
- Doing some social activities
- Meeting, mixing and talking with people

Joining some support group for Alzheimer's disease is also helpful for patient and mostly caregivers.

### **Can fading of memory be prevented?**

Memory starts fading with age and everyone is worried about it. Certain simple things in daily life can help to prevent fading of memory. These include:

- Regular moderate physical exercise

- Healthy diet that includes fruits, and vegetables
- Control of diabetes, blood pressure, cholesterol
- Vitamin supplements
- Mental stimulation and lifelong learning
- Daily good quality sleep
- Avoiding excess stress
- An active social life

### **How to handle the patient?**

Caregiver is the person who most often looks after the patient with Alzheimer's disease. Caregivers may be family members, or close friends.

Caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease is a balancing act as the disease is different for everyone. The condition of patient can change a lot. He/she may appear normal at times and may be very dependent at other times. The care giver needs to act as per condition of patient. Try to patient safe and comfortable, keep track of his/her medications and doctor's appointments, and give support. One may seek professional help for comforting the patient.

### **Where do I get some additional information about Alzheimer's disease?**

- <http://www.webmd.com>
- <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk>
- [www.medicalnewstoday.com](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com)
- Alzheimer's Disease support group, Deenanath Mangeshkar Hospital, Pune, India