

Alzheimer's Awareness GUIDE



Alzheimer's: A Slow Killer

Alzheimer's disease, the most common type of dementia, is a progressive brain disorder that slowly destroys brain cells, causing memory loss and changes in thinking and many other brain functions. There is no cure for this condition, which is the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States.

These symptoms typically develop slowly and worsen as the disease progresses, eventually becoming severe enough that people suffering from the disease have trouble performing daily tasks or remembering loved ones' names. The Alzheimer's Association offered facts about this disease that Americans should know.

Because the disease usually starts in the part of the brain that affects learning, the first symptom to be noticed is typically difficulty remembering new information. Other, more severe symptoms include disorientation; mood and behavior changes; deepening confusion about the past; unfounded suspicions about family, friends and caregivers; serious memory loss; and difficulty with physical action like speaking, swallowing and moving.

Some change in thinking and memory is normal with aging, so the early signs are sometimes missed. People who experience possible symptoms often don't recognize they may be ill, so signs of dementia may be more noticeable to people around them. Anyone experiencing symptoms should see a doctor right away. Early diagnosis can help with treatment. It can also help to include the per-



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son with Alzheimer's in more of the decision-making while they are still able and contribute to better management of the disease, which is beneficial for the ailing person as well as their caregivers.

The greatest risk factor is

age. Most people who have Alzheimer's are age 65 or older. However, about 200,000 Americans have been diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's who are under the age of 65.

Alzheimer's gets worse with

time. Alzheimer's, like other forms of dementia, gets worse over time. In its early stage, memory loss is mild; it isn't always obvious to the person suffering or those around them. As it progresses, however, people forget more and

more, including people forgetting what year it is and where they live, relationships and basic information. On average, people diagnosed with the disease live about eight years after their symptoms become noticeable to others.

FAQs About Alzheimer's

An Alzheimer's diagnosis can be scary, and people often don't know where to turn for information or even what questions to ask the doctor. The National Institute of Aging answered a number of the most frequently asked questions about Alzheimer's disease.

What is the difference between Alzheimer's and dementia?

Dementia is a loss of ability to think, remember and reasoning skills that progressively interferes with a person's daily life. Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia; other types are frontotemporal disorders and Lewy body dementia.

What are the stages of Alzheimer's?

- **Preclinical:** Symptoms are not obvious, but the brain cells are degenerating and dying.
- **Early (mild):** Symptoms like memory loss, confusion and inability to do previously easy tasks begin to appear. These symptoms don't always point to dementia, but anyone experiencing these symptoms should see a doctor.
- **Middle:** Memory loss and confusion worsens; people may have difficulty recognizing family and friends.

- **Late (severe):** Loss of ability to communicate, sleeping more, weight loss and difficulty walking, slowing and functioning appear. The person eventually becomes completely dependent on caregivers.

What is the treatment for Alzheimer's?

Although there is no cure, the FDA has approved a num-



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ber of drugs to treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's. There also are clinical and therapeutic treatments that can help control behavioral symptoms. There also are clinical studies taking place that help scientists study the brain during Alzheimer's to find new prevention and treatment methods.

Scientists have not found

any natural options that effectively treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's.

Is there a way to prevent Alzheimer's?

The short answer is no. Since we don't know what causes most cases of Alzheimer's, there's no concrete way to prevent it. However, a healthy diet, regular exercise, keeping

weight in check and quitting smoking, if you are a smoker, can lower the risk of all chronic diseases. Scientists also are looking at the role social activity and keeping the brain active may play in lowering the risk of Alzheimer's.

What if I can't afford treatment?

People in the final stages of

Alzheimer's generally need full-time care, which can be difficult for family members who take on caregiving duties. Families may need additional financial help to pay for care. Eldercare Locator, the National Council on Aging and the Family Caregiver Alliance are possible sources for financial assistance for people with Alzheimer's or their caregivers.

10 Warning Signs

Alzheimer's can be difficult to detect early on because the common symptoms could also be general signs of an aging brain — forgetting information or how to do a technical task, slower physical movements. Knowing what to look for can help with early diagnosis and treatment and management of the disease.

The Alzheimer's Association listed 10 warning signs that could indicate dementia.

1. Memory loss that disrupts daily life, especially forgetting recently learned information. Also watch out for forgetting important events, repeatedly asking for the same information or needing to rely on memory aids.

2. Challenges in problem-solving or concentration, including difficulty following a recipe or keeping track of bills. Regular tasks may take longer to complete than normal.

3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks like driving to a regular location, managing a budget or remembering the rules of a game.

4. Confusion with time or place and forgetting where they are or how they got there. People suffering from dementia may have difficulty understanding something that is not happening right now.

5. Trouble understanding visual images or spatial relationships, vision problems, difficulty reading or judging distance or distinguishing between colors. This may cause difficulty with driving.

6. Problems speaking or writing, joining the middle of a conversation or being able to keep up a conversation.



They may struggle to find the right words or use wrong name to describe something.

7. Losing or misplacing items, losing the ability to backtrack to find items they've misplaced or accusing people around the of stealing items they have misplaced.

8. Exercising poor judgment in decision making, such as giving large amounts of money to telemarketers or scammers or other bad financial decisions, paying less attention to their own hygiene or house cleaning.

9. Withdrawing from work

or social activities, ceasing to participate in hobbies or following a favorite sports team. This could be because they have difficulty remembering how to participate or self-imposed isolation because of the changes they've experienced.

10. Changes in mood and

personality, with ill people becoming confused, suspicious, depressed, anxious, fearful or even paranoid. They may get upset easily with friends, family or coworkers or when they are in places that are out of their comfort zone.

Early Onset Alzheimer's

Although the risk of Alzheimer's and dementia increases with age, more than 200,000 Americans younger than age 65 (about 5 percent of those diagnosed with the disease) are living with younger or early onset Alzheimer's.

The disease can be particularly difficult to diagnose in this age group because doctors aren't looking for signs of dementia in people in their 40s and 50s. Symptoms often are attributed to stress, mental illness or other symptoms, which makes living with the disease even more frustrating.

As with traditional Alzheimer's, people affected with the early onset form of the disease can be in the early, middle or late stage of dementia and experience the disease differently, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

CAUSES OF EARLY ONSET ALZHEIMER'S

Scientists don't have an answer for most cases of early onset Alzheimer's. However, they have discovered a number of genes that cause the disease, which afflicts a few hundred families throughout the world. People who inherit these genes may develop symptoms as early as their 30s. This type of Alzheimer's is called familial Alzheimer's disease. It is not, however, the cause of most cases of the disease.

GETTING A DIAGNOSIS

Regardless of age, people experiencing noticeable memory problems should get a comprehensive medical evaluation, preferably with a doctor who specializes in



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dementia. This could include cognitive tests, a neurological exam or brain imaging. Also, write down the memory problems or other cognitive difficulties you're experiencing to bring to your doctor. There is not a single test that confirms Alzheimer's disease, so a complete evaluation is necessary.

LIVING WITH EARLY ONSET ALZHEIMER'S

Because this disease strikes earlier, people afflicted with it often still have careers and have children at home and thus experience the disease quite differently. The association recommends talking to your children so they under-

stand what the diagnosis means for your family and the future. Although there is no cure, taking care of your physical and mental health can help you live a more fulfilled life.

Check with your health insurance and your employer to see what benefits are avail-

able, such as Family and Medical Leave Act, disability insurance and early retirement.

Make critical legal and financial decisions, ensuring your future health care decisions are in writing and your will and other financial documents are up to date.

Dispelling Alzheimer's Myths

Alzheimer's is a fairly well known illness, but there is a lot of misinformation as to what causes it, how successful treatment can be and other facets. Because there's a lot we don't know, people often look for answers that research doesn't back up.

The Alzheimer's Association shared a number of the most common myths and the actual facts behind those myths.

MYTH: Drinking out of aluminum cans can cause Alzheimer's

About 50 years ago, Americans looked at aluminum exposure as a possible cause of Alzheimer's. This suspicion made people worry about pots, pans and soda cans as well as antiperspirants and certain antacids. Studies have not confirmed any of these suspicions, and scientists today are looking at other possible causes of the disease.

MYTH: Treatments are available that stop the progression of Alzheimer's

Sadly, there are no such treatments. Alzheimer's destroys the brain cells and is always fatal, and scientists have not yet found a way to even slow the disease long-term. The FDA has approved drugs that seem to temporarily slow the symptoms for a few months for about half the individuals who need them.

Myth: Aspartame causes memory loss

Aspartame is an artificial sweetener

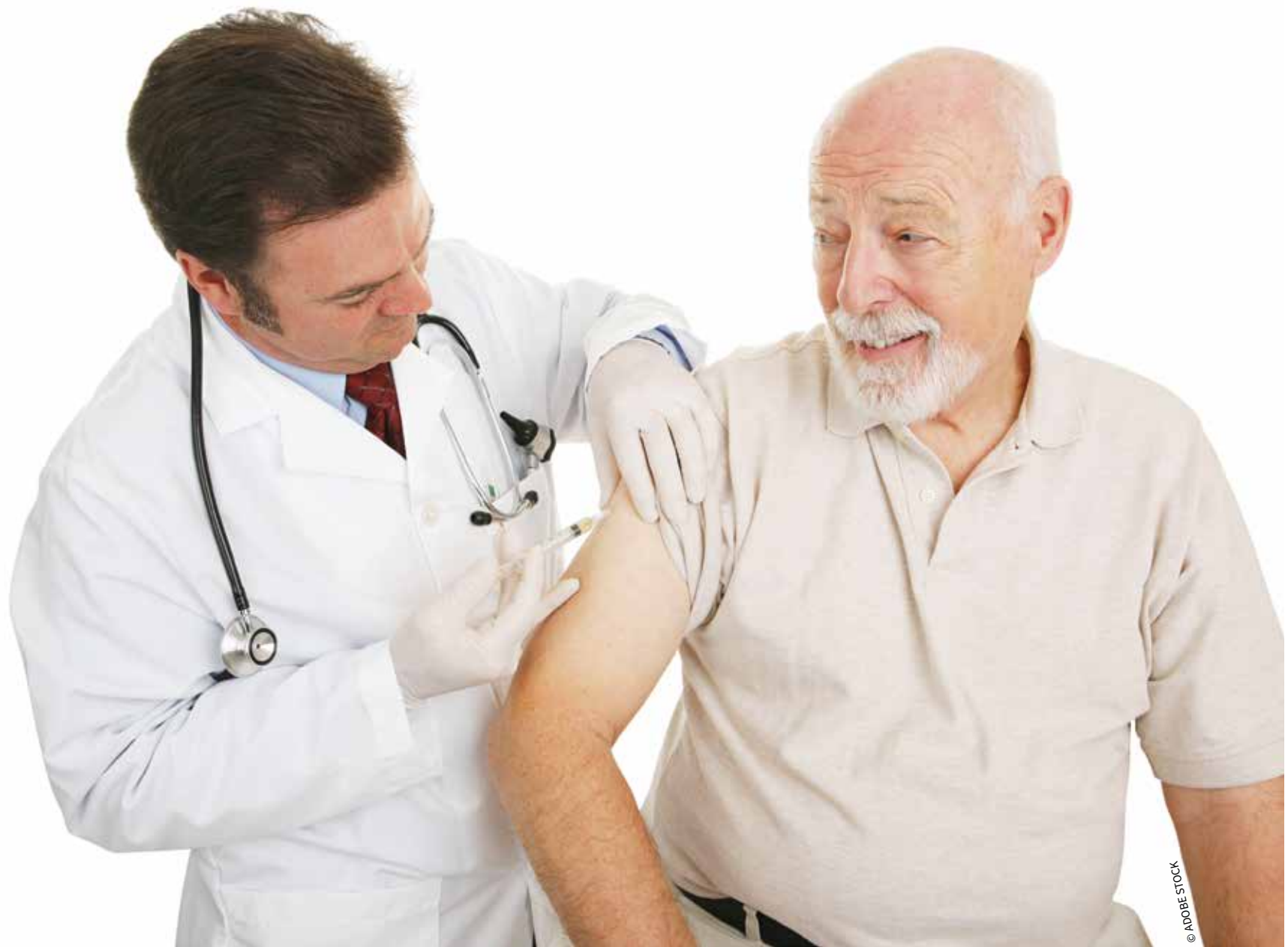
used in a number of products and sold on its own under brand names like Nutrasweet and Equal. The Food and Drug Administration approved its use in 1996, since that time, a number of concerns have been raised about its safety for human consumption. However, there is no scientific evidence backing up concerns that aspartame use is related to memory loss or other symptoms of dementia.

Myth: Silver dental fillings increase the risk of Alzheimer's

The concern about this arose because silver fillings are less than half silver; they are mostly mercury, which is a heavy metal that can be toxic in certain forms. However, the FDA, the World Health Organization and other public health organizations say there is no relationship between silver amalgam fillings and Alzheimer's.

Myth: Vaccines increase the risk of Alzheimer's

This idea, put forward by a now-discredited doctor, has been shown to be false. On the contrary, a number of studies show regular vaccinations, including tetanus, diphtheria, polio and even an annual flu shot not only contribute to a reduced risk of Alzheimer's but contribute to greater overall health.



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Everyday Life

An Alzheimer's diagnosis affects the person's family almost as much as the person who is diagnosed. It can be difficult for partners, family members and friends to cope with the changes in the person; many take on caregiving and other responsibilities while at the same time considering a future without their loved ones.

Caregivers should make sure they are receiving the help and support they need.

The Alzheimer's Association lists creating a new balance as one of the biggest challenges for caregivers. You may not know how much help to provide, especially in the early stages of the disease, when the person is still largely independent and are able to work, drive and go about their daily tasks with relative ease. When you look at when to help and when to back off, consider the following factors:

- **Safety:** Is there an immediate safety risk for the person with Alzheimer's or others around them? If there is no immediate risk, provide encouragement and supervision, if needed.

- **Stress:** Prioritize tasks that don't cause unnecessary stress or take steps to make tasks less stressful.

- **Assume the best:** Assume the person with dementia is able to complete the task. Don't intervene immediately; watch for signs of frustration before helping. Focus on the person's needs.

- **Talk to the person:** As long as the person with Alzheimer's is lucid, talk to them about how best to provide support and what tasks are most frustrating or might require some help. Create a



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plan and a help signal.

You also may reassign household tasks. Budgeting, calendaring, keeping track of medications and organizing are among the most difficult tasks for someone suffering with dementia, so a partner may want to take those on or

at least take on a larger or more supervisory role. In addition, people with Alzheimer's may need reminders about appointments and remembering dates such as birthdays and anniversaries. Find responsibilities that the person is able

to do by themselves or without much oversight, helping them to retain as much independence as possible.

This balance will change as the disease progresses, so be open to reassessing the person's needs and having these conversations regularly.

A person in the early stages of Alzheimer's also is likely to feel a sense of loss, grief, rage, denial, frustration and other emotions, similarly to what family members feel. Consider talking to grief counselor or joining a support group.

Caring for the Caregivers

Finding out a loved one has a fatal disease introduces a host of emotions.

Alzheimer's can be particularly difficult because the person experiences personality changes, forgets people they know and becomes in many ways a different person. Family members who take on caregiving responsibilities face a host of mental and emotional challenges and need to actively protect their own health as well.

UNDERSTAND YOUR EMOTIONS

Caregivers may feel overwhelmed occasionally (or more than occasionally), as well as a range of emotions, including fear, despair, grief, frustration and anger.

Alzheimer's never takes a break and will just continue to worsen, so it's important for caregivers to get the help they need. That means taking time away from the person who is sick, dividing caregiving responsibilities between family members and bringing in outside help if needed and if the family can afford it.

GET EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

For your own emotional health, consider seeking support such as time with a counselor or meeting with a support group. The Alzheimer's Association has early stage



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support groups for both people who have been diagnosed and their caregivers. If there are none in your area, consider online support groups.

Also build a network of people who can provide support. This can include others in your family or other caregivers, but also look outside the circle of people who know your ill relative — people who

you will be able to call on as the disease progresses and you need to reach out to others who can offer that support.

ENGAGE IN STRESS-RELIEVING ACTIVITIES

Make time to go running or to the gym, watch your favorite sports team, crochet, cook, restore a car or do other activities that bring you joy, that

help you handle stress or that give you a chance to take a break from the responsibilities of caregiving.

Make taking time for yourself a priority, including healthy eating, exercise and getting enough rest.

TRY NOT TO TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY

Alzheimer's can cause

paranoia and personality changes, as well as increased emotions in the person who is sick that makes them more likely to lash out in frustration or anger as they find themselves less able to do tasks they used to be able to do.

Remember, it is often the disease talking, not the person.