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Alzheimer's Awareness

GUIDE

What Is Alzheimer's?

Alzheimer's disease is in the dementia family of disorders. It is a progressive brain disorder that destroys brain cells over time, leading to memory loss, changes in thinking, inability to care for one's self and the loss of many other brain functions. As of now, there is no cure for Alzheimer's.

People with Alzheimer's often see symptoms develop slowly, worsening as the disease progresses. It will eventually become severe enough that people suffering from it are unable to perform daily tasks or remembering their family members' names, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

It is the sixth-leading cause of death in the U.S., which makes it important to know what to look for and what to know about it. The disease usually starts in the area of the brain that controls learning; because of this, the first symptom typically to be noticed is difficulty retaining new information. As the disease progresses, more severe symptoms arise; these include serious memory loss,



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disorientation, confusion about the past, changes in mood and behavior, paranoia or suspicions, and difficulty with the most basic physical actions like swallowing or speaking.

The greater risk factor for Alzheimer's is age; the highest incidence of the disease occurs in people 65 years of age and older. This isn't

always the case, however; according to the association, about 200,000 Americans have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's when they were younger than 65.

It's not uncommon for people to experience changes in thinking, memory loss or greater difficulty in movement or regular tasks as people age, so it can be hard to

differentiate between early symptoms of Alzheimer's or other dementia, which start out mild, and the normal effects of aging. It is even harder for the affected person to notice any changes, so family members and regular visitors should keep watch on loved ones who are getting older. Although there isn't a cure, early diagnosis helps

with treatment, so see a doctor right away if you suspect a loved one may be experiencing the early stages of Alzheimer's. It's also good for the person afflicted with the disease to know early on, while they still have their faculties, so they can participate in their own care decisions and management of the disease.

What You Need to Know

People typically live about eight years after symptoms of Alzheimer's become noticeable to those around them, which means a lot of time to make decisions, ask questions, gather information and cope with the effects of the disease.

It can also be really scary, especially knowing the disease will get worse. The National Institute of Aging is a good resource for answering questions or just offering questions to ask your loved one's medical team. Here are some things to know:

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ALZHEIMER'S AND DEMENTIA

Dementia is a progressive brain disorder that leads to the loss of a person's ability to think clearly and critically, to remember and to go about their regular daily routines. Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia and manifests similarly.

ALZHEIMER'S OCCURS IN FOUR STAGES

- Preclinical: Brain cells are degenerating and dying, but symptoms aren't obvious yet.
- Early or mild: Memory loss, confusion and inability to do



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previously easy tasks begin to appear. These aren't always symptoms of dementia, but anyone experiencing these symptoms should see a doctor.

- Middle: Memory loss and confusion gets worse; patients may have difficulty recognizing family and friends.
- Late or severe: Marked by the loss of ability to communicate, weight loss, difficulty walking and sleeping more.

The person eventually becomes completely dependent on caregivers.

THERE ARE TREATMENTS FOR ALZHEIMER'S

The Food and Drug Administration has approved several drugs to treat symptoms of dementia and Alzheimer's. Other treatments can help control some of the behavioral symptoms that

come with the disease. There are also clinical studies which allow scientists to study the Alzheimer's-affected brain to find new prevention and treatment methods, which can allow patients access to novel treatments as well.

YOU HAVE OPTIONS

People in the final stages of Alzheimer's typically need full-time care. For family members

who are taking on caregiving duties, that can be incredibly challenging. People who are experiencing or approaching this stage and need hospice care or other options can get help. Check with Eldercare Locator, the Family Caregiver Alliance and the National Council on Aging for financial assistance and other resources to help you through this difficult time.



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What Causes Alzheimer's?

It's complicated.

We know age is the single most critical factor. According to the National Institute on Aging, about one-third of all Americans who are 85 years and older may have Alzheimer's disease. The number of people who have Alzheimer's doubles every five years among people who are older than 65. Age-related changes in the brain, like

shrinking of parts of the brain, inflammation, the production of free radicals (unstable molecules within the body), and the breakdown of energy production inside cells all are linked to the damage of brain cells, which contributes to Alzheimer's damage.

Apart from age, there's a lot more to this disease. Genetic, lifestyle and environmental factors likely contribute to Alzheimer's, but the importance of each risk factor differs among populations and

individuals. Mutations or damage to genes can lead to early onset familial Alzheimer's and other diseases. Genes also can have a variant that increases someone's risk of contracting the disease but doesn't directly cause it. Both early and late onset Alzheimer's diseases have a genetic component.

As if that weren't enough question marks, other factors related to individual lifestyles can have an effect on the development of Alzheimer's,

including possibly affecting the likelihood of an individual getting the disease. Researchers have looked at the relationship between the decline in brain activity and conditions like heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure.

Additionally, staying physically and mentally healthy throughout life has beneficial effects. The NIA recommends a nutritious diet filled with fruits, vegetables, whole grains and unsaturated fats

that come from nuts and fish; physical activity, which can range from 30-minute walks five to seven times a week to kickboxing, hiking, running or weight-lifting (talk to your doctor about what you can safely do if you're not sure or are starting a new exercise regime); social engagement. There is no science demonstrating that these lifestyle factors reduce the risk of cognitive decline, but they will contribute to greater overall health.

Warning Signs of Alzheimer's

Forgetting a fact, calling someone by the wrong name, occasionally getting confused — by themselves, these aren't necessarily incidents to worry about.

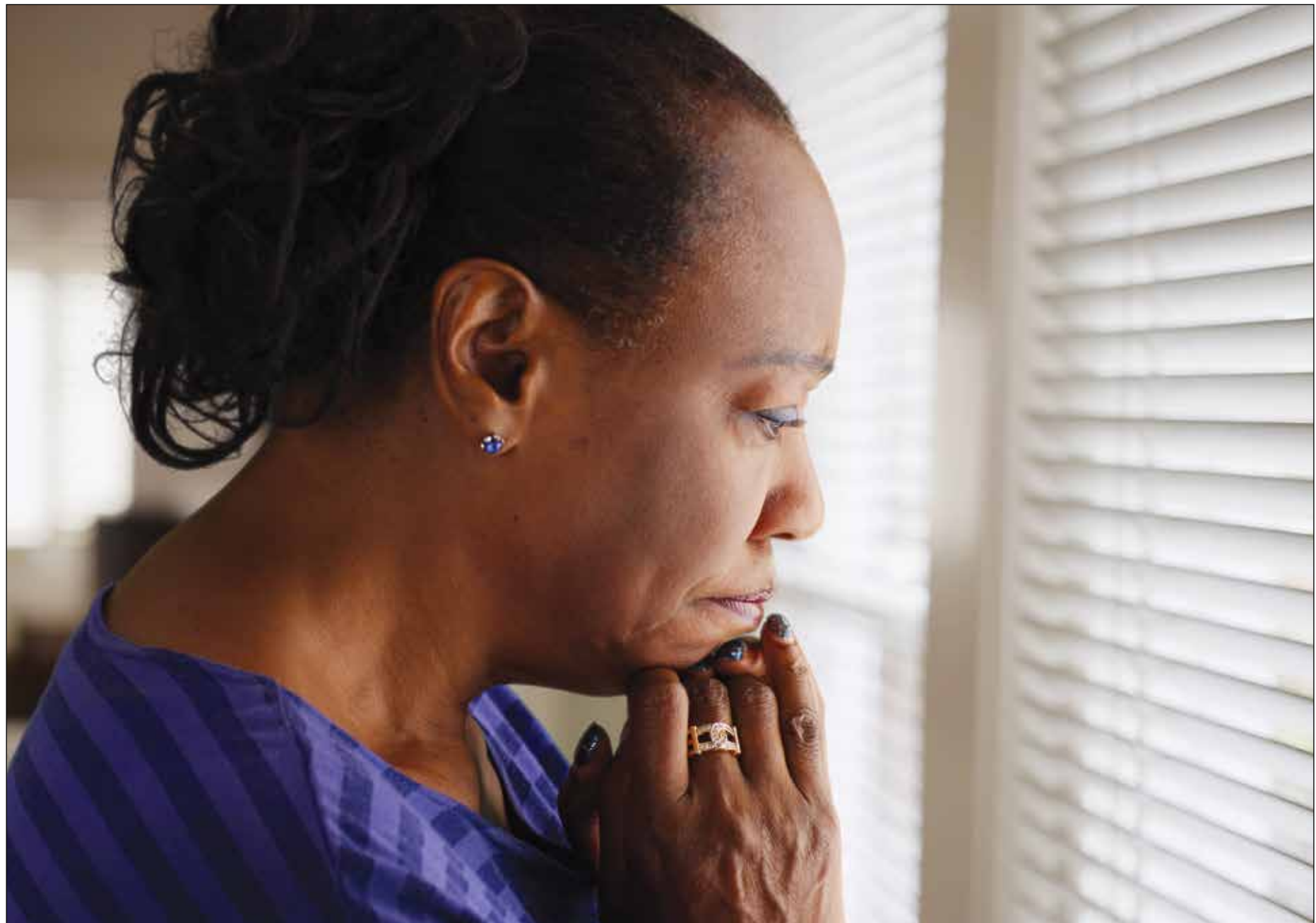
But if someone in your life does all of these, forgets names and dates frequently or seem to be experiencing personality changes, they may be in the early stages of Alzheimer's or dementia. The Alzheimer's Association provides 10 signs or symptoms to look for that could precipitate a trip to your loved one's doctor.

1. Difficulty concentrating or solving problems, having a difficult time with tasks like following a recipe or keeping track of bills, taking longer to complete regular tasks.

2. Forgetting things often enough to affect daily life, especially with recently acquired information or forgetting important events, repeatedly asking the same questions, suddenly needing memory aids.

3. Getting confused about time or place or forgetting where they are or how they got there.

4. Struggling to complete regular household tasks, such as driving to work, church, the grocery store or other regular destinations; trouble remem-



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bering the rules of a game or how to use a piece of equipment.

5. Difficulty understanding visuals or spatial relationships; experiencing vision problems; having difficulty reading, distinguishing between colors or measuring distances.

6. Losing items or forgetting where they put items; difficulty retracing their steps to find items they've misplaced; para-

noia about people stealing items they've lost.

7. Difficulty talking, writing and otherwise stringing words together or finding the right word; using the wrong word to describe something; difficulty following a conversation.

8. Withdrawing from work or social activities; quitting hobbies or clubs or following a sports team. This can be especially worrisome if they are

self-isolating because they recognize the changes they're experiencing and are embarrassed or angry or don't want others to see the changes.

9. Changes in personality or mood; becoming confused, suspicious, depressed, fearful, angry or paranoid in situations that didn't typically induce such emotions; getting easily upset with friends and family members or in situations

when they are out of their comfort zone.

10. Exercising poor judgment as they make decisions, such as giving money to scammers over the telephone, spending large amounts of money on items they don't need or can't afford or making other bad money decisions; paying less or no attention to house cleaning, work and even their own hygiene.

Participating in a Clinical Trial

Researchers who study Alzheimer's are always testing new drugs and other clinical and therapeutic treatments to prevent, slow the progress of, and maybe one day cure the disease.

To do this research, they look for people at various stages of Alzheimer's to participate in clinical trials to determine whether these new treatments are safe and effective. The Alzheimer's Association explains what you need to know about clinical trials and how you can get involved.



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WHY ARE CLINICAL TRIALS IMPORTANT?

For new drugs, the Food and Drug Administration requires three phases of clinical trials before releasing the drugs to the market. For most drugs, the trial is designed to compare the new treatment to the current best treatment on the market. If there is no drug on the market, the trials compare the new treatment to a placebo.

WHAT TREATMENTS ARE BEING STUDIED?

There are two types of treatment trials: those that study treatments aimed at reducing symptoms and treatments

intended to slow or stop the disease. For the first type of treatment trial, studies look at whether changing the dose or schedule of a medication makes a difference, or whether those medications will work better in concert with other drugs. Treatment trials of the second type introduce new drugs, which represent new ways of approaching treatment.

WHAT OTHER TYPES OF TRIALS ARE THERE?

Some researchers are looking for better ways to diagnose Alzheimer's. These studies may one day lead to a diagnostic method that is measurably reliable and easy for doctors to apply. These will help doctors be more laser-focused on what symptoms to look for and miss fewer of those earlier cases.

Researchers also are looking at possible preventative techniques like medications, vitamins and lifestyle changes, usually working with groups that are considered high-risk, and quality of life studies, which look for ways to better address the support, education and emotional needs of people with Alzheimer's and their caregivers.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Talk to your doctor about available clinical trials for which you qualify. If you are in a support group or seeking mental health counseling, see what resources they can recommend to connect with you these trials. People whose loved ones have Alzheimer's or have been told they are at risk for the disease can reach out as well.

Having a Loved one with Alzheimer's

The Family Caregiver Alliance called Alzheimer's a family disease. The stress of watching a loved one progress further into the disease never sleeps and it affects everyone around the ill person.

It's especially hard for people in a caregiving role. This is especially true for caregivers of a person in the late stages of Alzheimer's, when they need near-constant care and attention. Caregivers need to ensure they receive the help and support they need as well.

According to the alliance, about 15 million Americans act as unpaid caregivers to a person with Alzheimer's or dementia. The biggest thing to keep in mind is paying attention to self-care: ensuring their needs are met, including time for healthy eating, exercise and getting enough sleep; getting emotional support, including professional counseling; and opportunities to take a break from caregiving.

Education and training also helps. Learning what problems to look for and what different symptoms or actions could indicate and how to respond to them, knowing when to call a doctor, learning how to manage difficult behaviors and communicate with their loved one help to keep the person



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with Alzheimer's safe and as healthy and happy as possible. Having education and training also helps the caregiver to feel more empowered, experience less stress and have better health themselves.

Caregivers can also seek out support groups, either in per-

son or online. In addition to serving as an additional resource for information, these groups are a good place to vent, ask questions and find people who are in similar situations. They can help you through the difficult emotions you may experience as you

watch your loved one change as the disease worsens.

The Alzheimer's Association also recommended an important thing to keep in mind for caregivers — don't take things personally whenever possible. 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.

Early Onset Alzheimer's

The risk of dementia and Alzheimer's increases with age, but it's not exclusive to retirees.



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About 5% of those diagnosed with the disease, or more than 200,000 Americans younger than age 65, are living with early onset Alzheimer's. Largely because it's unexpected, the disease can be particularly difficult to diagnose in this age group; doctors aren't looking for signs of dementia in younger people. Early symptoms often are attributed to stress, mental illness or other conditions. This reality makes living with the disease even more frustrating for the affected person and their

loved ones. According to the Alzheimer's Association, 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.

SUSPECTED CAUSES

Researchers can't point to a single cause in cases of early onset Alzheimer's. However, they have discovered a number of genes that cause the disease; these genes afflict 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 the cause of most cases of the disease.

GETTING DIAGNOSED

Regardless of age, people who are experiencing memory problems should see their doctor for a comprehensive medical evaluation. This could include cognitive tests, a neurological exam or brain imaging. When you notice symptoms, write down the

memory problems or other cognitive difficulties you're experiencing to bring to your doctor. There is no one 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 are still working and may have children at home. This can change the emotional experiences with the disease. The association recom-

mends talking to your children so they understand what the diagnosis means for their family and what could be coming in 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 employer to see what benefits are available to help you cope, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act, disability insurance or early retirement. Make critical legal and financial decisions and put it all in writing.