



## What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. This information sheet outlines the symptoms and cause of Alzheimer's disease and describes what treatments are currently available.

Alzheimer's disease was first described by the German neurologist, Alois Alzheimer, as a physical disease affecting the brain. During the course of the disease 'plaques' and 'tangles' develop in the structure of the brain, leading to the death of brain cells.

We also know that people with Alzheimer's have a shortage of some important chemicals in their brain. These chemicals are involved with the transmission of messages within the brain.

Alzheimer's is a progressive disease, which means that gradually over time more parts of the brain are damaged. As this happens the symptoms become more severe.

### Symptoms

People in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease may experience lapses of memory and may have problems finding the right words. As the disease progresses they may:

- Become confused and frequently forget the names of people, places, appointments and recent events.
- Experience mood swings. They may feel sad or angry. They may feel scared and frustrated by their increasing memory loss.
- Become more withdrawn because they lose confidence or have problems communicating.

As the disease progresses people with Alzheimer's will find that they need more support from those who care for them. Eventually they will need help with all their daily activities. While there are some common symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, it is important to remember that everyone is unique. No two cases of Alzheimer's are likely to be the same. People will always experience illness in their own individual way.

### What causes Alzheimer's disease?

So far no one single factor has been identified as a cause for Alzheimer's disease. It is likely that a combination of factors, including age, genetic inheritance, environmental factors, diet and overall general health, are responsible.

4th Floor, 79 Roeland Street (Corner Harrington & Roeland Str), Cape Town  
Tel [+27 21 421-0077](tel:+27214210077) / 78 Fax [+27 21 418-2772](tel:+27214182772) Email: [info@dementiasa.org](mailto:info@dementiasa.org)  
[www.dementiasa.org](http://www.dementiasa.org)

National Helpline: 0860 MEMORY / 0860 636 679  
049-191 NPO PBO 930022142



## **Age**

Age continues to be the greatest risk factor for dementia. Dementia affects one in 20 over the age of 65 and one in five over the age of 80 but Alzheimer's is not restricted to elderly people. (there are 17000 people under the age of 65 with dementia in the UK).

## **Genetic inheritance**

Many people fear that they may inherit Alzheimer's disease. Scientists are currently investigating the genetic background to Alzheimer's. We do know that there are a few families where there is a very clear inheritance of the disease from one generation to the next.

These are often in families where the disease appears relatively early in life. In the vast majority of cases, however, the effect of inheritance seems to be small, such that if a parent or other relative has Alzheimer's disease your own chances of developing the disease are only a little higher than if there were no cases of Alzheimer's in the immediate family.

## **Environmental factors**

The environmental factors that may contribute to the onset of Alzheimer's disease have yet to be identified. A few years ago there were concerns that exposure to aluminum might cause Alzheimer's disease. However, these fears have largely been discounted.

## **Other factors**

Because of the difference in their chromosomal make up, people with Down's syndrome who live into their 50s and 60s may develop Alzheimer's disease.

People who have had severe head or whiplash injuries appear to be at increased risk of developing dementia. Boxers who receive continual blows to the head are also at risk.

Research has also shown that people who smoke and those who have high blood pressure or high cholesterol levels increase their risk of developing Alzheimer's.

## **Getting a diagnosis**

If you are concerned about your own health, or the health of someone close to you, it is important to seek help from a GP.

An early diagnosis will:

- Help you plan for the future.
- Mean that the person with dementia can benefit from the treatments that are now available.
- Help you identify sources of advice and support.

There is no straightforward test for dementia. A diagnosis is usually made by excluding other causes.

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The GP or specialist will want to rule out infections, vitamin deficiency, thyroid problems, brain tumors, the side-effects of drugs and depression.

### **Specialists**

Your GP may ask a specialist for help in carrying out a diagnosis. The specialist may be a psychiatrist, a neurologist or a geriatrician. Who you will see will depend on the age of the person being examined, how physically able they are and how well services are developed in the area.

### **Tests**

The person being tested will usually be given a blood test and a full physical examination. The person's memory will be assessed, initially with questions about recent events and past memories. They may also be given a detailed assessment of memory and thinking skills by a psychologist.

A brain scan may be carried out to give some clues about the changes taking place in the person's brain. There are a number of different types of scans, including CT (computerized tomography) and MRI (magnetic resonance imaging).

### **Treatment**

There is currently no cure for Alzheimer's disease. However, there are a number of drug treatments available that can delay the onset of symptoms in some people in the early to middle stages. People with Alzheimer's have been shown to have a shortage of the chemical acetylcholine in their brains.

These drugs are not a cure, but may stabilize some of the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease for a limited period of time. Side-effects may include diarrhea, nausea, insomnia, fatigue and loss of appetite.

### **Caring for someone with Alzheimer's**

There's a lot that can be done at a practical level to ensure that people with Alzheimer's live as independently as possible for as long as possible.

We have a range of information sheets and guides for people with dementia and their carers. We also provide support to carers and people with dementia.

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