

Alzheimer's Disease

Introduction

Alzheimer's Disease (Alzheimer's) is a type of dementia. "Dementia" is the term used to describe a serious decline in intellectual function, including memory, the ability to think, and behavior. The primary organ affected by this disease is the brain, specifically the areas involving cognitive function and memory function. Mild memory problems, including difficulty recalling names or retrieving information, are seen with normal aging. Memory may be affected by multiple small strokes, Parkinson's Disease and a variety of medical illnesses and medications. Recent estimates put the number of Americans suffering from Alzheimer's at 4 million. The prevalence of this disease rises with age, with approximately 47% of individuals affected by age 85.

Alzheimer's and related dementia have a tremendous impact on the spouse and on the family caregivers (who are often referred to as the "hidden victims" of the disease). Alzheimer's indeed affects the entire family. It is important that caregivers get support because the stress of caring for someone with Alzheimer's often is mentally and physically draining for caregivers. When the caregivers become ill, they no longer are able to care for the patient, resulting in institutionalization of Alzheimer's patients.

Symptoms

The onset of Alzheimer's usually is gradual, beginning with minor memory problems and progressing to significant memory loss. Alzheimer's also may cause visio-spatial difficulties, poor judgment, personality changes or other evidence of impaired brain function. In turn, this decline in mental function leads to behavioral and emotional changes, loss of ability to care for oneself, and ultimately death due to physical deterioration. Alzheimer's affects each individual differently. Therefore, the number and degree of symptoms, as well as the course of the disease, may vary from person to person. Eventually, Alzheimer's leaves its victims totally unable to care for themselves. Symptoms you may notice in an individual with Alzheimer's include problems remembering recent events; difficulty in performing familiar tasks; confusion; personality and behavioral changes; impaired judgment; and difficulty in finding words, in finishing thoughts or in following directions. Be particularly alert for depression, which often occurs early and is hidden or "masked" in Alzheimer's patients. If it is suspected, seek professional help.

Services Available

Caregivers for the Alzheimer's patient will need support and assistance in giving that care. There are many people who can help—family and friends, health care professionals, Alzheimer's Association Chapter members, and others. Specialized programs and services can make life easier and more enjoyable for the caregiver and the person with Alzheimer's. For example, individuals with Alzheimer's may forget or refuse to eat. Meals on Wheels is a helpful program, but someone may have to be at home to accept delivery and supervise the eating. It is important that an individual with Alzheimer's receives help from people who are trained to help those with Alzheimer's.

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Health Care Services

If you suspect that someone you know has Alzheimer's, it is important to contact your family physician or nearby teaching hospital for a physician referral. A comprehensive evaluation involving physicians, nurses, neurologists, and social workers can assist families in developing comprehensive plans of care for patient and family. Medical professionals also can evaluate the patient for other medical problems that may be causing or contributing to the dementia. It is important to have one primary care physician. That physician can provide continuing care for the person with Alzheimer's, and in providing that care, treat other illnesses that arise, prescribe medications, answer questions, and provide caregiver support. When needed, the caregiver may seek a second opinion from a physician specially trained in managing Alzheimer's disease. A physician may also suggest that you consult a geriatric psychiatrist to help manage the behavior, depression and personality changes that often accompany the disease. Nurses involved with Alzheimer's patients or Alzheimer's support group members can teach family members the ongoing practical care of a person with Alzheimer's.

A family may also want to consult an attorney experienced in medical assistance law or the local Department of Social Services to advise them on their rights to government financial support through Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, disability, or veterans benefits.

Rest for the Caregiver

The job of caring for a person with Alzheimer's can be overwhelming. It is important that the caregiver take an occasional break, away from hands-on caregiving. Remember that asking for help will allow you to care for your loved one longer. There are several options for the caregiver to have some time away from caregiving. These options provide for care for the Alzheimer's patient for a few hours, a few days, or even on a permanent basis.

Day-to-Day Assistance for the Caregiver in the Home

If you would like the Alzheimer's patient to remain in the home, you may contact visiting nurses, home health aides, and paid companions to provide service in the home. These individuals provide services that may include health care, personal care, shopping, cooking, or housework. Make sure that the person providing the home care is familiar with Alzheimer's so that they can provide special care.

Day-to-Day Assistance Outside the Home

Adult day care programs provide people with Alzheimer's several hours a day of structured recreation and mental stimulation. In an adult day care program, people with Alzheimer's can interact with others, exercise, listen to music, and engage in other activities. These activities can give them an opportunity to enjoy life and can be extremely beneficial to the patient and the family.

Short-Term Assistance for the Caregiver

Certain hospitals, nursing homes and residential facilities offer short-term stays for the Alzheimer's patient. This service, often called "respite care," provides full-time care of the Alzheimer's patient within the facility for a period of days or weeks. When the Alzheimer's patient is in respite care, the caregiver has a chance to take a vacation or just get some relief from the stress of caregiving.

Long-Term Assistance

As Alzheimer's disease advances and symptoms worsen, the family of the Alzheimer's patient may have to decide to make other living arrangements for the patient. Placing a family member in a nursing home or other long-term facility for any reason is a difficult decision, and yet, at some point, it may be the most responsible

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decision that can be made. Some nursing homes specialize in the care of persons with Alzheimer's, offering so-called Alzheimer's or Special Care Units. A word of caution: be certain the program that you choose is in fact one of substance with high-quality personnel. It may be beneficial for you to actually visit the program and observe it in action. If a person with Alzheimer's is terminally ill, he or she may be accepted in a hospice program.

Resources for Families

Alzheimer's affects families physically, emotionally, financially, and socially. Many families find that other problems become magnified under the stress of caregiving and that they need help, support, or advice in areas not directly related to the illness. Although you may receive support from families, neighbors and clergy, it may be advisable to seek outside assistance. The Alzheimer's Association often receives phone calls from families of Alzheimer's patients who have questions about protecting the future security of the patient and/or his family. The Alzheimer's Association has chapter and peer support groups in cities across the country and provides the support families need. In addition to providing support and guidance, many chapters offer educational literature, consumer information and workshops for caregivers and professionals. There also is a Safe Return program which creates a file with photographs of the Alzheimer's patient, that can be of assistance if the patient becomes lost. Call your local Alzheimer's Association chapter for more information.

Legal Considerations for Alzheimer's Patients

As soon as Alzheimer's is suspected, the family and the patient should meet with a knowledgeable attorney to plan for legal and financial complications. This is important because during the early stages of the disease, the Alzheimer's patient may be capable of participating in legal and financial planning to protect the future management of his or her life and assets. When meeting for a legal consultation, it may be helpful to have the following documents: executed wills and trusts, prior tax returns, health and life insurance policies, pension information, deeds, mortgages, bank accounts, and information about other financial investments. Below are several legal issues which should be considered.

Making Life Easier

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With the continued increases in health care costs, it is more important now than ever for individuals to focus on prevention of illness and injury. There are many ways seniors can make daily tasks safer and easier. Alternative methods and self-help devices are available to allow continued independence or a return to independence after illness or injury.

Prevention of Injury or Illness

The prevention of injury or illness is important to everyone and especially seniors. The following suggestions may prove beneficial to seniors as aids in averting the onset of illness or injury.

1. Exercise

Statistics have proven that even a minimal amount of exercise is beneficial. Regular exercise not only is