

What You Need to Know about Alzheimer's Disease

Many older people forget someone's name or misplace things from time to time. This kind of forgetfulness is common with aging. But forgetting how to get home, getting confused in well-known places, or asking questions over and over can be signs of a more serious problem. Someone with these symptoms may have Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's is a brain disease that causes problems with memory and thinking. It slowly gets worse over time until a person can no longer do daily tasks by themselves.

What Is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease is an illness of the brain. It causes large numbers of brain cells to stop working properly. This affects a person's ability to remember things, think clearly, use good judgment, and, eventually, carry out daily tasks. Doctors don't know what causes Alzheimer's disease. They do know that for most people with the disease, symptoms first appear in their mid-60s or later.

Help for Caregivers:

Help is available for caregivers. You don't have to do everything yourself. See the list below for ways to get help.

- Join a support group.
- Use adult day care services or arrange for a caregiver to come to your home for a short period of time.
- Ask friends and family to help with caregiving tasks.
- Get help from agencies that offer in-home care.
- Contact local and national groups for information about Alzheimer's disease.

Coping as a Caregiver

Caring for a person with Alzheimer's can involve highs and lows. You may feel good because you are taking care of someone you love. You may also feel overwhelmed. Being a caregiver can be even more difficult when the person with Alzheimer's gets angry with you, hurts your feelings, or forgets who you are. Sometimes, you may feel discouraged, sad, lonely, frustrated, confused, or angry. These feelings are normal.

Here are some things you can say to yourself that might help you feel better:

- I'm doing the best I can.
- What I'm doing would be hard for anyone.
- I'm not perfect, and that's okay.
- I can't control some things that happen.
- Sometimes, I just need to do what works for right now.
- I will enjoy the moments when we can be together in peace.
- Even when I do everything I can think of, my loved one will still have difficulty because of the illness, not because of what I do.

Take Care of Yourself

Each day brings new challenges. You may not even realize how much you have taken on because the changes can happen slowly over time. Taking care of yourself physically and mentally is important and may also offer you some relief. You can:

- Ask friends and family to help out.
- Do things you enjoy and spend time with friends.
- Take short breaks.
- Eat healthy foods and get exercise.
- Consider talking to a therapist or counselor.

Finding ways to make time for yourself can bring you some relief. It also may help keep you from getting ill or depressed.

Alzheimer's Disease

*Employee Assistance Program
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Alzheimer's disease is a type of dementia, a term that describes the loss of the ability to think, remember, and reason. There are many types of dementia, but Alzheimer's is the most common.

What Happens?

Alzheimer's disease often starts slowly. In fact, some people don't know they have it. They assume their forgetfulness is because of old age. However, over time, their memory and thinking problems get more serious.

People with Alzheimer's have trouble doing everyday things like driving a car, cooking a meal, or paying bills. They may get lost easily and find even simple things confusing. Some people may become worried, angry, or violent.

As the illness gets worse, most people with Alzheimer's need someone to take care of all their needs, including feeding and bathing. Some people with Alzheimer's live at home with a caregiver while others live in assisted living or a nursing home.

Archbold Memorial
Employee Assistance Program
902 Cairo Road Thomasville, GA 31792
229.228.2210 • 1.877.EAP.ARCH

What are the Signs?

Memory problems are often one of the first signs of Alzheimer's disease. Symptoms vary from person to person. Some signs of the disease are listed below:

Early Signs

- Finding it hard to remember things
- Asking the same questions over and over
- Having trouble paying bills and working with numbers
- Getting lost
- Losing things or putting them in odd places

Middle Signs

- Forgetting how to brush your teeth or comb your hair
- Problems recognizing family and friends
- Emotional outbursts

Later Signs

- No awareness of recent experiences or surroundings
- Losing interest in eating, which may cause weight loss
- Difficulty speaking, swallowing, and using the bathroom

Mild Cognitive Impairment

Some older people have a condition called **mild cognitive impairment**, or MCI. It can be an early sign of Alzheimer's, but not everyone with MCI will develop Alzheimer's disease. People with MCI can still take care of themselves and do their normal activities. MCI memory problems may include:

- Losing things often
- Forgetting to go to events or appointments
- Having more trouble coming up with words than other people of the same age

If you think you might have MCI, ask a doctor to check for changes in your thinking, memory, and language skills.

Differences Between Alzheimer's Disease and Normal Aging

Normal Aging:

- Making a bad decision once in a while;
- Missing a monthly payment;
- Forgetting what day it is and remembering it later;
- Sometimes forgetting which word to use; and
- Losing things from time to time.

Alzheimer's Disease:

- Making poor judgments and decisions a lot of the time;
- Problems taking care of monthly bills;
- Losing track of the date or time of the year;
- Trouble having a conversation; and
- Misplacing things often and not being able to find them.

Other Causes of Memory Problems:

Some medical conditions cause confusion and forgetfulness. The signs may look like Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia, but they may be caused by other problems. Below are conditions that can cause serious memory problems:

- Bad reaction to certain medicines
- Emotional problems such as depression
- Not eating enough healthy foods
- Too few vitamins and minerals in your body
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Blood clots or tumors in the brain
- Head injury, such as a concussion from a fall or accident
- Kidney, liver, or thyroid problems

These conditions are serious and need to be treated. Once treated, your confusion and forgetfulness may improve.