

What is Alzheimer's Disease?

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Alzheimer's (AHLZ-high-merz) disease is a complex, progressive disease that destroys cells in the brain. Common symptoms include gradual memory loss, problems with reasoning or judgment, disorientation, difficulty in learning, loss of language skills and decline in the ability to perform routine tasks. People with Alzheimer's also experience changes in their personalities and behavior, such as agitation, anxiety, delusions and hallucinations.

Today, about 4.5 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease. Unless a prevention or cure is found, between 11 and 15 million Americans will have Alzheimer's by 2050.

PROGRESSION OF THE DISEASE

Alzheimer's disease advances at widely different rates in different people. The duration of the disease varies from three to 20 years; the average duration is about eight years. The areas of the brain that control memory and thinking skills are affected first, but as the disease progresses cells die in other regions of the brain. The loss of brain cells eventually leads to the failure of other systems in the body. Eventually, the person with Alzheimer's will need complete care. If the individual has no other serious illness, the loss of brain function itself will cause death.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE BRAIN IN ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE?

The symptoms of Alzheimer's disease are due to various abnormal biochemical reactions in the brain that disrupt the complex communication system between nerve cells. Precisely when or how these destructive processes start is not known, however, it is now clear that impairments in nerve cell functioning begin years before the symptoms can be detected.

In the brain, the destruction caused by Alzheimer's disease is recognized by the clutter of dead or dying neurons and the signature lesions of the disease known as "plaques" and "tangles." Amyloid (*AM-ih-loyd*) plaques are clumps of protein fragments that accumulate outside of brain cells. Neurofibrillary (*NUR-o-FIB-ri-lai-ree*) tangles are clumps of altered proteins inside cells.

Research about these structures has provided clues about why brain cells die in Alzheimer's disease, but scientists have not determined exactly what role plaques and tangles play in the disease process.

OTHER CAUSES OF DEMENTIA

Alzheimer's disease is the leading cause of dementia. Dementia is a broad term for a group of symptoms related to a progressive decline in thinking skills. Several disorders that are similar to Alzheimer's disease can cause dementia. These include Creutzfeldt Jakob disease, fronto-temporal dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies, Parkinson's disease and Huntington's disease.

Vascular dementia is a disorder caused by the disruption of blood flow to the brain. This may be the result of a massive stroke or several tiny strokes.

Some treatable conditions - such as depression, drug interactions and thyroid problems - can cause symptoms that mimic dementia. If diagnosed and treated early enough, these conditions may be effectively treated and even reversed. It is important to see a doctor for a thorough evaluation when you think you or a loved one may be showing some of the warning signs of Alzheimer's.

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