

Identifying Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease was first described by German psychiatrist Alois Alzheimer in 1906. At the time, it was relatively rare, since most people died too young to feel its full effects. Now that people are living longer, however, it has become a much more common disease. Twenty percent of those aged 75 to 84, and almost half of those aged 85 or more, suffer from it. Some researchers estimate that by 2010, 6 million people in the United States will have Alzheimer's, and by 2050 that number could climb to 14 million.

What is Alzheimer's? And how is it identified?

Alzheimer's is a disease that affects brain functioning. Although scientists still do not know for sure what causes it, they do know that the brains of Alzheimer's sufferers begin to develop protein filaments and lesions

called "tangles." As the tangles progress throughout the brain, the symptoms become more and more severe. Other findings include amyloid (or protein) plaques on the neuron which can be seen in an MRI. The disease primarily affects the hippocampus (memory) and the cerebral cortex (cognition).

On average, Alzheimer's disease lasts seven years, but for some people it goes on for as many as 20 years. There is still no cure for the disease—only treatments. Pharmaceutical companies are working on drugs to slow or halt the deterioration of the brain, and other researchers are studying the most effective ways of helping sufferers and their families cope with the effects of the disease.

Stages of Alzheimer's Disease

There are three basic stages of Alzheimer's disease. Here are some of the symptoms that characterize each stage:

STAGE 1

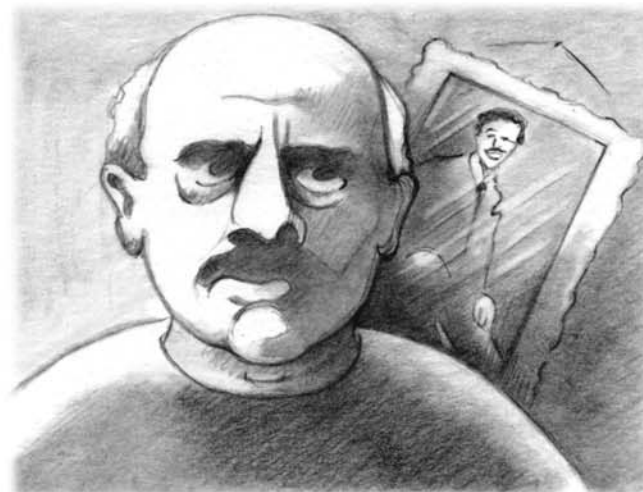
- Inattention
- Minor memory loss
- Mood swings
- Apathy
- Confusion
- Poor judgment
- Anxiety
- Forgets to pay bills

STAGE 2

- Needs assistance with complicated activities
- Speech and understanding slow down
- Loses trains of thought
- Depression
- Restlessness
- Irritability
- Unable to recognize familiar faces
- Gets lost
- Remembers distant past while forgetting recent events
- Loses sense of place and time

STAGE 3

- Loses ability to chew and swallow
- Extremely poor memory
- Inability to recognize people, places, things, self
- Loses bowel and bladder control
- Becomes vulnerable to pneumonia and other illnesses
- Eventually needs constant care



Is It Alzheimer's?

Unfortunately, there is still no foolproof way to determine if someone is suffering from Alzheimer's disease—as opposed to many of the other forms of dementia caused by such things as strokes, tumors or vitamin deficiencies.

If you suspect someone that you care for has Alzheimer's disease, a doctor can perform a test called a Mini Mental State Exam—which tests for orientation, registration, attention and calculation, recall and language ability. A doctor can also run a MRI or a PET scan to rule out the possibility of a stroke. Together, these tests can help to determine whether it is likely a person is suffering from Alzheimer's. Often, a doctor will order a full series of lab tests to rule out other diseases. These include multidisciplinary testing, including medical history, medications and a psychiatric review. Although there is no definitive test, if Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) guidelines are used, there is a 90 percent accuracy rate for diagnosis.