



What is Alzheimer's dementia?

Alzheimer's dementia (AD) is a brain disease where the nerve cells responsible for thinking are slowly damaged over time. AD is the most common cause of **dementia**, which is a decline in thinking that interferes with one's everyday functions. It is believed that more than 5 million Americans over the age of 65 and at least 200,000 people in America under the age of 65 have AD.

What are the causes of Alzheimer's dementia?

In AD, the brain contains abnormal protein deposits called plaques (made up of amyloid protein) and tangles (composed of tau protein). These deposits begin 10-20 years before a person develops symptoms of the disease. Rarely, AD is caused by a genetic mutation that leads to excess amyloid protein in the brain. In most cases, though, the cause of AD is not known. However, scientists have learned a great deal about what factors may increase a person's risk of developing AD.

The single most important risk factor for developing AD is age. The likelihood of developing AD doubles every 5 years after age 65. Additional factors that appear to increase the risk of developing AD include:

- Family history of AD
- Other health conditions, such as diabetes and high blood pressure
- Lack of physical activity
- Obesity or a poor diet
- Smoking
- Limited education

What are the symptoms of Alzheimer's dementia?

AD is often described in "stages." Each stage has typical symptoms, though these may vary between people. Progression from one stage to the next is gradual.

Early stage

AD begins gradually and may, at first, be difficult to recognize. Common early difficulties include trouble with the following tasks:

- Remembering recent events
- Keeping track of time
- Naming familiar people or things
- Solving problems
- Planning
- Learning new things

Middle stage

Memory loss progresses and people find it more difficult to:

- Read
- Write
- Speak
- Perform household tasks
- Choose and/or put on clothing
- Bathe without reminders

Late stage

A person with advanced AD is often unable to:

- Communicate
- Recognize people, places, or objects
- Walk

They may sleep much of the time and usually need full-time care.

Other Symptoms

Other symptoms that can occur at any stage include changes in:

- Mood, such as anxiety or depression
- Personality
- Behavior, including agitation

How is Alzheimer's dementia diagnosed?

No single test leads to a diagnosis of AD. Rather; a diagnosis is made after a complete evaluation that includes:

- A detailed history and physical exam, including information from family members or others who know the person well
- Tests to evaluate memory and thinking
- Blood tests, brain scans, and in some cases genetic tests or spinal fluid testing

What are the prognosis and options for treatment?

There is no known cure for AD. The duration of the disease can vary from a few years to more than 20 years. Most people live 8-10 years after being diagnosed. There are five different prescription drugs used to slow the symptoms of AD:

- Donepezil (Aricept®)
- Galantamine (Razadyne®)
- Rivastigmine (Exelon®)
- Memantine (Namenda®)
- A combination drug called Namzaric®

Where can I learn more?

You can find more information about AD at:

- The Alzheimer's Association
www.alz.org or by calling (800) 272-3900
- The National Institute on Aging
www.nia.nih.gov or by calling (800) 438-4380

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