

FAQ's About Alzheimer's Disease

WHO IS AT RISK FOR DEVELOPING ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE?

- Familial or early-onset Alzheimer's is caused by a gene mutation that is inherited from a parent, but only occurs in less than five percent of patients and develops between the ages of 30 and 60.
- Late-onset Alzheimer's typically develops after age 60 and is the most common form of the disease. Currently it is difficult to determine exactly who is at risk for developing late-onset Alzheimer's, but studies show that increasing age is the most important known risk factor.
- Alzheimer's disease's definitive cause is not known and no clear pattern of inheritance has yet been discovered, but scientists have identified genes that may influence the risk of contracting the disease. Researchers are also studying education, diet, and other factors to see if they play a role in developing the disease.

WHAT CAUSES ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE?

- Scientists do not yet fully understand what causes Alzheimer's disease. For most people, there probably is not one single cause, but several genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors that affect each person differently.
- Chronic diseases (heart disease and diabetes), diet, exercise, and social engagement may also play a role in whether or not a person develops Alzheimer's.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE AND DEMENTIA?

- Dementia is the symptom and Alzheimer's is the cause of the symptom. In other words, one can have dementia without it being Alzheimer's disease, such as the dementia associated with a head injury, Parkinson's, a stroke or vascular dementia, frontotemporal dementia or Lewy body disease.
- Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. Dementia symptoms include memory issues with additional problems in at least one other area of cognitive function. The cognitive changes associated with dementia are noticeable in comparison with the person's earlier life and severe enough to inhibit aspects of daily living.
- Some causes of dementia may be reversible, but most are degenerative diseases that will worsen over time.

WHAT IS MILD COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT?

- Mild cognitive impairment, or MCI, is a condition in which people have more memory problems than normal for their age, but their symptoms are not as severe as in Alzheimer's disease and they are able to carry out their normal daily activities.
- People with MCI are more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease than are people without MCI.



HOW IS ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE DIAGNOSED?

- While currently only an autopsy can definitively confirm the presence of the disease, skilled physicians can correctly diagnose Alzheimer's disease about 90 percent of the time based on mental and behavioral symptoms, a physical examination, blood tests, urinalysis and neuropsychological tests.
- The doctor can use such test results to eliminate other forms of dementia—for instance, certain vitamins and hormones can provoke symptoms of dementia if they are present in too little a quantity. Brain scans can rule out non-Alzheimer's disease dementia and can reveal structural changes present in Alzheimer's disease.

WHAT CHANGES IN THE BRAIN HAPPEN TO PEOPLE WITH ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE?

- People with Alzheimer's disease develop abnormal clumps in their brains (called amyloid plaques) and tangled bundles of fibers (called neurofibrillary tangles).
- As increasingly more plaques and tangles form, healthy nerve cells begin to lose their ability to communicate with each other and eventually die. As the nerve cells die, brain tissue begins to shrink.

ARE THERE TREATMENTS AVAILABLE FOR ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE?

- While there is currently no cure for Alzheimer's disease, there are medications that can help to control some symptoms such as depression, aggression or hallucinations. However, some of these medicines can react badly with other Alzheimer's medicines as well as worsen other symptoms of the disease. For example, tranquilizers can cause confusion and slowed reactions, which can lead to falls, and some medicines to treat hallucinations can cause sedation and drops in blood pressure.
- It is important to discuss the pros and cons of medications with the doctor before making a decision regarding medication. In addition, it is important to consider the possible side effects of over-the-counter medications, including cough and cold remedies and sleep medicines to avoid reactions with other medicines.
- Keep in mind that many Alzheimer's symptoms are caused by non-medical "triggers", which can oftentimes be managed without the use of medications. Triggers could include a change in the person's environment, such as a new place to live, a new caregiver, or a change in routine or from frustration at the inability to communicate. If the trigger can be identified, the environment can be modified to change the behavior.
- Modifying the environment and the caregiving atmosphere to reduce potential stressors plays a large part in helping a person with Alzheimer's feel calm and safe.

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Sources: WebMD, American Health Assistance Foundation, FactsForHealth.org, NIHSeniorHealth, Alzheimer's Reading Room