

What You Should Know About Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive disease that causes brain cells to degenerate and die. The results of this disease are impaired memory, thinking and behavior. Alzheimer's disease is the fourth leading cause of death among adults in the United States affecting an estimated 4 million Americans currently. It is projected that by the year 2050 an estimated 14 million American adults will have the disease. Currently ten percent of American adults over 65, and almost half of those over age 80, have Alzheimer's disease. However, due to improved testing and greater public awareness, physicians are seeing an increase in diagnosed patients in their 40s and 50s. Alzheimer's disease strikes equally at men and women, all races, and all socioeconomic groups.

The exact causes of Alzheimer's disease are still unknown, and presently there is no cure. There are some conditions and diseases however, that may cause a person to exhibit Alzheimer's-like symptoms. These include depression, nutritional deficiencies, drug interaction or intoxication, and thyroid imbalances. These symptoms may sometimes be reversible with a physician's care. Symptoms are also associated with stroke, Huntington's Disease, Parkinson's disease, Pick's disease and AIDS.

The main warning signs of Alzheimer's disease are: short term memory loss, difficulty performing familiar tasks, problems with language, disorientation to time and place, poor or decreased judgment, problems with abstract thinking, misplacing things, changes in behavior or personality, and loss of initiative.

If you have been forgetting things lately, and are afraid you might have Alzheimer's, don't worry. People who have Alzheimer's don't remember they've been forgetting!

If you think a loved one has been exhibiting the warning signs above, have him or her evaluated. He may have Alzheimer's disease or it may be a more treatable condition.

The following evaluations should be done.

- ◆ Medical history (including drug and medication review) - This is necessary in order to establish progressive intellectual deterioration and identify personality changes, problems with memory, and difficulty with daily activities.
- ◆ Physical examination - This is used to rule out other causes of dementia, such as vitamin deficiency, thyroid disease, infections, circulatory disease, brain tumors, head injuries, and depression.
- ◆ Diagnostic studies, including chest x-ray, Electrocardiogram (EKG), stool test for blood not observable on sight, Urinalysis, Neurological exam, Computerized Tomography Scanning (CT scan), or Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) or Positive Emission Tomography (PET), if indicated.
- ◆ Mental Status Test - This test is used to rule out emotional and intellectual impairment as well as psychiatric conditions. A person's orientation, attention, memory, judgment, thought process, and mood should be evaluated.

If the diagnosis comes up Alzheimer's disease or a similar degenerative dementia, prepare for many years of caring for the individual, including legal, financial, housing, protection, and medical issues.

Contact the Alzheimer's Association (In Orange County, call 714-283-1111) - They have counselors and support groups that help family members cope with the complicated care issues involved.