

PATIENT AND CARER INFORMATION: INTRODUCTION TO ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE



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We have written this material to introduce you to some aspects of Alzheimer's disease. Our aim is to answer some of the questions you may have about the nature, warning signs, and misconceptions of the disease.

What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease is an irreversible, progressive brain disorder that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills, eventually leading to the inability to carry out simple tasks. It is not a normal part of ageing.

This disease is the most common form of dementia, which is a general term for loss of memory and other cognitive abilities serious enough to interfere with daily life activities. Alzheimer's disease accounts for 60 to 80 per cent of dementia cases.

How Alzheimer's disease affects the brain

The brain receives oxygen and nutrients from the blood supply, which is used to power its network of cells. These cells communicate with each other through intricate systems that support specific functions of the brain. Although the cause remains unclear, Alzheimer's disease disrupts the functioning of brain cellular systems by causing the progressive death of brain cells. The prime suspects for the cause of Alzheimer's disease are proteins called plaques and tangles; however, scientists are not sure whether the abnormal presence of these proteins is merely a byproduct of the disease.



Generally, healthy behaviours translate to healthy brains and may even offer some protection against Alzheimer's disease. These behaviours include exercising regularly, eating a healthy diet, avoiding tobacco, and staying socially and intellectually active.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

1 Memory loss that interrupts daily life

People with Alzheimer's disease may forget recently learned information including important dates/events or ask for the same information over and over again. This results in dependence on memory aides.

Typical age-related change

Occasionally forgetting names, appointments or misplacing items, but often remembering them later is normal. Abnormal forgetfulness occurs with increasing frequency or all the time.

2 Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace one's steps

People with Alzheimer's disease often lose things. They may put things in unusual places and are unable to go back over their steps to find them again. Sometimes, they may accuse others of stealing

Typical age-related change

Misplacing things from time to time, such as a pair of glasses, is normal.

3 Confusion with time or place

People with Alzheimer's may lose track of dates, seasons - and they may even forget where they are or how they got there.

Typical age-related change

Getting confused about the exact date but being able to eventually figure it out is not abnormal.

4 Poor judgment

People with Alzheimer's disease exhibit poor judgment especially as it relates to finances. They may also pay less attention to grooming or to keeping themselves clean.

Typical age-related change

Making a bad decision once in a while is normal.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

5 Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships

People with Alzheimer's disease have difficulty judging distance and discriminating a visual image. For example, a person with Alzheimer's disease may walk past a mirror and fail to recognize his or her own reflection, in some cases thinking that the person in the mirror is someone else.

Typical age-related change

Vision problems are not uncommon in the elderly and may be caused by cataracts and other conditions of the eye.

6 Challenges in planning or solving problems

People with Alzheimer's disease may not be able to develop and follow a plan such as a simple task or activity (e.g. domestic chores and work-related tasks), or work with numbers, so activities such as keeping track of monthly bills will be hard for them.

Typical age-related change

Making occasional errors when balancing a cheque book or occasional mistakes during tasks is not abnormal. It is the persistence or progressive worsening of these errors that should raise red flags.

7 Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home or at work

People with Alzheimer's disease often find it stressful to complete their usual daily activities. This includes getting lost when driving or walking to a familiar location, managing personal or professional budgets or forgetting the rules of their favourite game.

Typical age-related change

Getting lost in unfamiliar or only slightly familiar places is not abnormal. Occasionally forgetting rules or tasks of activities seldom performed is not abnormal.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

8 Withdrawal from usual social activities

People with Alzheimer's disease may lose interest in hobbies and social activities often because of the changes they are experiencing.

Typical age-related change

Feeling weary and occasionally needing a break from social obligations is not abnormal.

9 Changes in mood and personality

People with Alzheimer's disease may undergo personality and mood changes. This includes becoming anxious, depressed, paranoid, suspicious, and uncharacteristically ill-tempered.

Typical age-related change

Occasional lapses into uncharacteristic behaviours are not abnormal. However, there is usually preserved insight into these lapses and the person is capable of self-correction.

10 New problems speaking or writing

People with Alzheimer's disease may struggle to find the right words during a conversation or they may call things by the wrong name. They may repeat themselves and ask the same questions over again.

Typical age-related change

Occasionally having trouble finding the right word during a conversation is normal. However, this should not occur all the time.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

- 1 Alzheimer's disease is a brain disease of the elderly.

Reality: It is not a normal part of ageing.

- 2 I am going to get Alzheimer's disease because someone in my family has it.

Reality: Although genetics play a role in Alzheimer's disease, fewer than 7% of the cases are associated with known genes. However, having a family member with Alzheimer's disease increases an individual's risk of developing it.

- 3 There is a cure for Alzheimer's disease.

Reality: Unfortunately, there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease. But there is hope for a cure, thanks to ongoing scientific research.

- 4 People under the age of 65 do not get Alzheimer's Disease.

Reality: Alzheimer's disease can develop in people under age 65, although this is less common.

CASE STUDY

Madam Grace Alabi is a 72-year-old mother and grandmother, and she is an accomplished, retired teacher. She began claiming to do things she had not done or was not capable of doing, and she often wandered aimlessly around her neighbourhood. Her family tried to keep a close eye on her, except for one night when she sneaked out of the house and never returned. She was subsequently found wandering distant streets in the middle of the night and was accused by the local residents of being a witch who fell from the sky. After responding "Yes" to the question "Are you a witch?" posed to her by a gathering mob, Madam Grace was beaten, stoned, and burnt to death. In fact, she had Alzheimer's disease and could not remember who she was.



COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

- 5 Alzheimer's disease does not affect Africans.

Reality: Alzheimer's disease affects people of all races. It is a global problem.

- 6 People with Alzheimer's disease understand what is going on around them.

Reality: The ability to understand deteriorates as Alzheimer's disease progresses to more advanced stages. In the early stages, this ability is preserved even as short-term memory disrupts daily functioning.

- 7 Alzheimer's disease is preventable.

Reality: There is no single treatment that can prevent Alzheimer's disease. Some scientific evidence suggests that the risk of Alzheimer's disease may be reduced by regular exercise, eating a healthy diet (cutting down on sugar and fatty food and increasing fruits and vegetables), staying mentally active (e.g. continuing to learn new things such as a new language), staying socially active, and regularly getting a good night sleep.

- 8 Once a person is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease there is nothing that can be done.

Reality: Although no cure exists for Alzheimer's disease, there is a great deal that can be done to help patients and caregivers in managing the disease. This includes managing challenging behaviours with medications; managing medical complications of Alzheimer's disease; supporting caregivers by providing social service, and addressing caregiver depression.

- 9 All people who have Alzheimer's disease become aggressive and violent.

Reality: Alzheimer's disease affects people differently and not all become aggressive or violent.

GWAF offers information and an array of resources to people with Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers

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