

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE HAS NO CURE

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Alzheimer's disease is a disorder of the brain that affects approximately 10% of all persons over the age of 70 and is likely to become the most prevalent disease of the 21st century with increasing life expectancy and coming of age Baby-boomers.

The normal brain sends messages via a system of neurons or special nerve cells that communicate through numerous biological and chemical signals. Millions of these signals go through the brain every moment. Alzheimer's disease breaks down the chemical connections; causing some nerve cells to improperly function; and kills others.

Alzheimer's disease progresses in a predictable enough fashion that is possible to identify in three stages.

The early stage lasts 2 to 4 years. During this period patients may repeat themselves often, chronically misplace items, have trouble finding words for familiar things and tend to get lost easily even on once-familiar routes. They show personality changes, typically becoming passive and losing interest in activities previously enjoyed. They are often alert, sociable and still enjoy life. However they may get frustrated easily by their forgetfulness.

Stage 2 or the moderate stage is the longest stage lasting from 2 to 10 years and characterized by worsening mental function and often disruptive behaviors. Patients may wander, pace become argumentative and start having delusions and hallucinations. Personal grooming may deteriorate; many patients have tremendous swings in appetites from huge to inadequate. Full supervision is often needed. At this stage of the disease wandering and repetitive pacing are common as are radical mood swings.

The third or severe stage usually lasts from 1 to 3 years. At this point most patients can no longer function on any level; they can no longer use or understand language nor can they remember. They suffer from acute confusion and at this point most long-term memory is gone. They may hallucinate, suffer from delusions and from paranoia. They usually have little capacity for self-care making constant care, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week now mandatory.

The diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease usually requires a painstaking evaluation by a physician who will usually get a detailed history from the patient and their family member or guardian. A thorough physical examination and one or more mental exams that test the patient's memory, attention, language and problem solving abilities among others is also conducted. They may require one or more brain scans as well. These are usually necessary to eliminate other possible cause of dementia, since the disease is diagnosed by excluding other possible causes of dementia and by identifying the typical syndrome complex associated with Alzheimer's disease. Accuracy of a clinical diagnosis is on the average 80% to 90% correct.

The healthcare provider looks out for areas most affected by the disease. These are the cognitive (how does the patient think?), functional (what is the patient's activity level) and behavioral (what are the patient's feelings).

The management of Alzheimer's disease is usually a joint effort of the clinician, patient and care giver. There is currently no cure for this condition at this time but we have drugs which are capable of slowing down the rate progression of this disease.

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