

Understanding Alzheimer's Disease

What Is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease is a slowly progressive deterioration of all parts of the brain that produces a loss of mental function in many areas. The cause is unknown, although much progress has been made in the past 10 years. Brain cells in all areas of the brain become sick, and die. The loss of functioning brain cells leads to a reduction in the chemicals that send information from one cell to the next. These chemicals are called "neurotransmitters."

What Problems May Indicate Alzheimer's?

As a result of these changes in the brain, people with Alzheimer's disease commonly have the following problems in the early stage of the disease:

Memory Loss

They have trouble recalling recent events even though they retain memories of events of long ago. They commonly repeat questions and lose track of an ongoing conversation or of something they are in the midst of doing.

Disorientation

They lose their sense of direction or of the passing of time.

Apraxia

They no longer remember how to use a familiar tool, like a screwdriver or can opener.

Anomia

They have frequent trouble finding the right word or the name of a familiar person, and the experience is frustrating because the word or the name is "right at the tip of the tongue."

***What Problems
May Indicate
Alzheimer's?
continued***

Personality Change

They will seem like a different person. Changes will be for the worse but sometimes are for the better, from the point of view of those around them.

Trouble with Routines

They may lose the ability to do things they've long been able to do, such as keep track of bills, prepare a simple meal, or use a checkbook.

Problems with Grooming

Their ability to bathe regularly, brush teeth, and maintain good personal hygiene may deteriorate, and they may also be willing to accept help with these tasks.

***What Should I
Do?***

Learning to understand the problems that develop within the family because of changes like these is a critical part of learning to cope with Alzheimer's disease. This understanding can allow the person with the disease to live longer at home and improve the quality of life for everyone in the household.

If you have a loved one who is affected by Alzheimer's disease, it pays to become an "expert" on the ways you can help. There is a lot of information available to help older adults, their families, friends, and other caregivers, understand and cope with Alzheimer's disease. Information on the variety of problems that may occur and strategies for dealing with them can be found through local organizations, such as a chapter of the Alzheimer's Association, and various national organizations. Information is also available in many publications and web sites.

The staff in your doctor's office or clinic can help you get started in finding helpful resources, as can your local library.