

Understanding Alzheimer's Disease

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About this booklet

Do you have questions about Alzheimer's disease? Please read this booklet. It tells you about:

- Alzheimer's disease (pronounced Allz-high-merz di-zeez)
- The signs of Alzheimer's disease
- Why it is so important to see your doctor early
- Treatment for the disease
- How to get help if you are caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease

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Helen's story:

"I have Alzheimer's disease. It took me a long time before I could even say the words. When the doctor first told me, I felt like my life was over. And for a while, I did get very depressed. But, my doctor told me about medicine I could take. She said it would slow down my memory loss for a while. I know it's not a cure. Still, it feels good to do something. Also, my family has been wonderful. They are helping me plan for the care I'll need. I have decided to take each day as it comes. I want to live my life as fully as I can."

Family members can help you plan for your care.

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John's story:

"I have friends whose parents have Alzheimer's disease. I never thought it would happen to someone in my family. It catches you by surprise. It takes some time to figure out what you need to do. Mostly, I was upset and worried. I had so many questions. What is Alzheimer's disease? Can it be treated? How is the disease going to affect my father? Will I be able to care for him? Where can I go for help?"

This booklet will help answer your questions about Alzheimer's disease.

You may have lots of questions about Alzheimer's disease.

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What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease is an illness of the brain. It causes large numbers of nerve cells in the brain to die. This affects your ability to remember things and think clearly. Doctors don't know what causes the disease. They do know that it usually begins after age 60 and nearly half of people age 85 and older may have Alzheimer's. However, it is not a normal part of aging. The disease often starts slowly. In fact, some people don't know they have Alzheimer's disease. They blame their forgetfulness on old age. However, over time, their memory problems get much worse. People with Alzheimer's lose the ability to drive a car, cook a meal, or even read a newspaper. They may get lost easily and find even simple things confusing. Some people become worried, angry, or violent. At some point, people with Alzheimer's disease may need someone to take care of all their needs (feeding, bathing, etc.) at home or in a nursing home.

What happens when you have Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease usually affects people over 60.

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Signs of Alzheimer's disease

It's really important to know the signs of Alzheimer's disease. If you know the signs, you can get help right away. Listed below are the early signs of Alzheimer's and the later signs that show up after you have had the disease for a while.

Early signs

- Trouble remembering recent events.
- Problems remembering names of people and places.
- Trouble solving simple math problems.

Later signs

- Forget how to brush your teeth or comb your hair.
- Cannot remember the names of common things such as desk, house, apple, etc.
- Wander away from home.

Trouble remembering recent events may be an early sign of Alzheimer's disease.

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See your doctor early

If you or someone in your family thinks your forgetfulness is getting in the way of your normal routine, it's time to see your doctor. **Seeing the doctor early means you can find out what's causing you to be forgetful.** If you have Alzheimer's, finding the disease early gives you and your family more time to talk about and plan for your treatment and care.

Your doctor may do the following things to help diagnose Alzheimer's disease:

- Check on your general health
- Ask questions about your family's health
- Talk to someone in your family about your memory problems
- Ask how well you can do everyday things like driving, writing a check, and talking with friends and family
- Test your memory, problem solving, counting, and language skills

- Do medical tests — such as checking your blood and urine
 - Do brain scans, also called CAT scans, that show pictures of your brain
- See your doctor as soon as you begin to have memory problems.

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Other illnesses that cause Alzheimer-like signs

You need to know that there are some illnesses and problems that may look like Alzheimer's, but are caused by other problems.

These include:

- Bad reaction to certain medicines
- Depression
- Not eating enough healthy foods, or too few vitamins and minerals in your body
- Brain tumors
- Blood vessel disease
- Thyroid problems

Some of these illnesses can be treated. Once treated, your confusion and memory loss should go away.

Treatment for

Alzheimer's disease

There are medicines that can treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's. However, there is no cure. Some medicines keep your memory loss and other symptoms from getting worse for a time. These medicines work best if Alzheimer's disease is found early. Other medicines work to help you sleep better or feel less worried and depressed. These medicines don't directly treat the disease. They do help you feel more comfortable. The point is to get checked out by your doctor. Don't let fear stop you from seeing your doctor. You can get help.

Some medications can help treat Alzheimer's disease.

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What about research on Alzheimer's disease?

Researchers are working very hard to find new and better treatments for this disease. They are doing research with people who have different kinds of memory problems to learn the best way to treat Alzheimer's. They also are looking at how to prevent Alzheimer's, slow the disease, and reduce the symptoms.

Clinical trials

Clinical trials are research studies that help doctors learn which treatments work best.

Healthy people and people with Alzheimer's may be able to take part in clinical trials. To find out more about these studies, contact the Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center at **1-800-438-4380**, or visit the ADEAR Center Website at **www.alzheimers.nia.nih.gov**.

You can learn more about clinical trials.

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Is there help for caregivers?

Yes. If you are caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease, you may feel overwhelmed. It can take all your time and energy. There is help for you. Learn about support groups, adult day-care programs, home healthcare services, and other helpful resources. You need

to take care of yourself in order to take care of someone with Alzheimer's disease. The Alzheimer's Association has chapters across the country that can help. Also, the ADEAR Center has two booklets that may be helpful: "The Caregiver Guide" and "Home Safety."

See page 11 for more information and resources.

Caregivers need help and support.

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Use this page to write down questions for your doctor

Summary - Important things to remember about Alzheimer's disease

- Know the signs of Alzheimer's disease.
- See your doctor early.
- There is treatment for the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.
- There is help for caregivers.

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Alzheimer's Association

**225 N. Michigan Avenue,
Suite 1700**

Chicago, IL 60611

Phone: 1-800-272-3900

Website: www.alz.org

Where can I get more information?

Contact the following organizations to learn about support groups, services, publications on Alzheimer's disease, research centers, and studies:

The Alzheimer's Association is a nonprofit organization offering information and support services to people with Alzheimer's disease and their families. Call to find out where to get help in your area.

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Call for more information on Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

P.O. Box 8250

Silver Spring, MD 20907-8250

Phone: 1-800-438-4380

Website: www.alzheimers.nia.nih.gov

Eldercare Locator

Phone: 1-800-677-1116

Website: www.eldercare.gov

Families often need information about community resources, such as home care, adult day care, and nursing homes. Contact the Eldercare Locator to find these resources in your area. The Eldercare Locator is a service of the Administration on Aging. It is funded by the Federal Government.

The Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center offers information on diagnosis, treatment, patient care, caregiver needs, long-term care, and research related to Alzheimer's disease.

Staff can refer you to local and national resources. The Center is a service of the National Institute on Aging, part of the Federal Government's National Institutes of Health.

For copies of this booklet, contact:

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P.O. Box 8250

Silver Spring, MD 20907-8250

Phone: 1-800-438-4380

Website: www.alzheimers.nia.nih.gov

U.S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Public Health Service

National Institutes of Health

National Institute on Aging

NIH Publication No. 06-5441

March 2006