



Alzheimer's Disease and Your Options

Alzheimer's disease is one of the most difficult illnesses many elders and their families must cope with. About 4 million people in the United States suffer from this syndrome, characterized by a progressive decrease in memory, intellectual, social, and physical abilities. Currently, there is no cure for Alzheimer's; the disease is considered terminal over the course of several years. But there are things people can do to experience a better quality of life after a diagnosis of Alzheimer's has been made.

What is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia: a brain disorder caused by degeneration of brain cells that leads to the loss of mental and physical functions. Scientists do not know exactly what causes Alzheimer's disease. The disorder predominantly affects the elderly but in rarer cases it can affect middle-aged adults. Approximately one in 10 people over age 65 and half of those over 85 have the disease.

Symptoms of Alzheimer's disease may include:

- Forgetfulness and gradual loss of memory (especially short-term memory)
- Inability to learn new information
- Confusion and disorientation (e.g., the tendency to get lost and misplace things)
- Tendency to repeat oneself
- Language problems (e.g., the inability to complete sentences or remember words)
- Poor or decreased judgment
- Change in personality (e.g., rapid mood swings, increase in anxiety, depression and irritability)
- Loss of initiative (e.g., lack of desire to start or complete activities)

Though the rate of degeneration varies from person to person, these symptoms are progressive and irreversible. The disease may last as long as 10 years, but it is ultimately fatal. Patients gradually become incapacitated and lose the ability to communicate, control bodily functions and care for themselves.

Family members and close friends are often the first to observe the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. If the elder exhibits any symptoms of Alzheimer's, have him or her evaluated by a physician to rule out the disease. The earlier Alzheimer's disease is diagnosed, the sooner you can take steps to protect your elder. Although Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia, other problems can mimic the effects of Alzheimer's, including those caused by stroke, depression, or alcoholism. Because different forms of dementia have different treatments, it is important to get an accurate diagnosis from a doctor or geriatric assessment clinic.

Treatment and Care Options

Currently, there are no effective options for treating Alzheimer's disease. Experimental drugs continue to be tested, though none have demonstrated success in reversing the course of the disease. Some drugs seem to have limited success in slowing the deterioration, though their long-term benefits are not proven.

A physician should always supervise the care of an Alzheimer's patient. To lessen some symptoms, the doctor may prescribe medications to slow down the deterioration of brain cells. The physician also may prescribe mild sedatives, anti-depressants, or anti-psychotic medication to control the elder's moods and behavior and improve his or her quality of life. Depending on the elder's condition, the physician may recommend mild exercise, activities, or physical therapy.

People with Alzheimer's disease should not live alone. The elder can probably be cared for at home during the early stages of the disorder, but as the disease progresses, he or she will eventually need professional nursing care at home or in a nursing facility. A physician should continue to monitor the elder's condition to recommend the most appropriate level of care. It is important to let the elder live as fully and productively as possible to ensure the highest quality of life; consider the following suggestions:

- **Let the elder continue daily routines**, such as an accompanied walk around the block or visits to a senior center.
- **Avoid making major changes** like altering favorite daily rituals or relocating.
- **Safety-proof the elder's home** carefully. Be sure that lighting is adequate, flooring is flat, rugs are secure, operable smoke alarms and fire extinguishers are in place, and any safety hazards are corrected.
- Encourage your **elder to make lists and write things** down if he or she shows signs of forgetfulness.
- **Purchase a special medical bracelet** for your elder to wear in case he or she wanders and gets lost. The bracelet should state the illness and a contact's name, phone number and address.
- As the disease progresses, many families **purchase alarm systems** to prevent the elder from wandering away from home or near dangerous areas like the stove.

The Toll on Families

The Alzheimer's experience can be especially trying for family members who will witness firsthand the elder's gradual degeneration. You and other caregivers will require constant patience, compassion, and emotional strength to give the elder the care and attention he or she needs. It is natural to sometimes feel emotionally overwhelmed; during these times, do not be afraid to ask for help. Try these suggestions:

- **Talk about your feelings** and frustrations with other family members and friends.
- **Alternate caregiving responsibilities** with others. Often, caregiving responsibilities are shared unequally among family members. Make fair caregiving arrangements and schedule alternating shifts and visits by other family members.
- **Take an occasional break.** Get someone to relieve you occasionally so that you can "recharge your batteries." Consider a home health aide, adult day care or a respite care center for the occasional overnight or weekend.
- **Join a support group.** A local hospital, church or community program may offer a support group for families of Alzheimer's patients. Your Employee Assistance Provider (EAP) or the Alzheimer's Association can refer you to one in your area.
- **Consider facilities for the elderly with dementia.** For many families, the decision to seek nursing home care for an elder with Alzheimer's is a very difficult one. Often, adult children have promised their parent that they will never take this step. Sometimes, when situations deteriorate, it is OK to consider other alternatives that will better protect the health, safety, and well-being of your relative and the entire family.

For more information on Alzheimer's Disease or for the local chapter of the Alzheimer's Association, visit www.alz.org.



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