

The New York Times

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Alzheimer's Disease Affects One Out of Ten Americans Over 65



It was June 2, 2001, when Julia, a 47-year-old teacher in St. Louis, was forced to acknowledge that something was wrong with her 81-year-old mother, Beatrice. The Los Angeles police called Julia that morning to inform her that Beatrice had been found wandering along the Santa Monica Freeway.

Although she had lived in the same house for 41 years, Beatrice couldn't remember her address. Fortunately, police found an envelope with Julia's address in the pocket of the ski parka Beatrice was wearing.

"My mother's life had been unraveling for some time," said Julia, who took the first plane to Los Angeles. "A meticulous housekeeper, my mother now allowed dirty dishes and dust to pile up. She also forgot important dates like my birthday and seemed tired and listless, symptoms I attributed over the years to normal aging."

Julia was unaware that Beatrice had exhibited the early signs of Alzheimer's disease (AD), a devastating neurological condition that, according to the Administration on Aging, affects about four million people in the United States. Although the majority of people diagnosed with the condition are older than 65, it is possible for the disorder to strike even those in their 30's.

Alzheimer's disease robs people of their memory and ability to perform simple and routine tasks, such as combing their hair or brushing their teeth. As the disease progresses, people with AD begin to have difficulty reading, writing and speaking. Later on, they may become anxious or aggressive and eventually may require total care.

Although there is no known cure, a careful evaluation is an important diagnostic aid because new medications can treat some of the early symptoms. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved four prescription drugs for treating mild to moderate AD: Aricept (donepezil), Cognex (tacrine), Exelon (rivastigmine) and Reminyl (galantamine).

Early diagnosis is especially helpful because memory loss and other symptoms are not always due to AD. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) estimates that about 5 to 10 percent of people who exhibit forgetfulness, confusion and mood changes have treatable conditions such as metabolic problems, depression, alcoholism, thyroid disorders or vitamin deficiencies.

Early symptoms often ignored

According to a report presented by Sanford Finkel, M.D., of the Council for Jewish Elderly at a meeting of the International Psychogeriatric Association in August, primary care physicians, like family and friends, often overlook early signs of cognitive impairment in older adults. Dr. Finkel noted that some four out of five older adults with early signs of cognitive impairment were not diagnosed or treated by their primary care physicians.

The study, which included 2,150 people over age 65 at 11 study sites in Illinois, found that even though 28 percent of participants had symptoms of cognitive decline, primary care physicians had noted symptoms in the medical records of only 5.6 percent of these individuals. Less than 2 percent of those who exhibited cognitive decline received any treatment. Also alarming was the finding that, although 28 percent showed signs of depression, only 5 percent had been diagnosed.

"This study confirms other reports about missed diagnoses," said Bill Thies, Ph.D., vice president of medical and scientific affairs at the Alzheimer's Association, which has prepared a list of warning signs to aid loved ones. "We have good clinical diagnostic tools, but many factors can influence their effectiveness. The results of this study highlight the need for greater awareness by family members and friends who can bring problems to the attention of a physician — and facilitate improvements in a system that allows little physician-patient interaction."

Scientists aren't sure what causes AD, but they do know that people with the disorder have an abundance of two abnormal structures in the brain: plaques and tangles. Plaques are sticky substances comprised of the protein beta-amyloid, while tangles are twisted fibers caused by changes in a protein called tau.

Both of these proteins act to block the normal transport of electrical messages between neurons that enable people to remember, speak and move. As AD progresses, nerve cells die and individuals gradually lose their ability to function. The National Institute on Aging (NIA) reports that, while the average life span of someone with AD is eight years following the onset of symptoms, some individuals live as long as 20 years.

The two biggest risk factors are age and genetics. For every 10 years of life after age 65, the number of people with the brain disorder doubles. Nearly half of all people 85 and older in the United States have AD, according to the NIA.

While there is no single test to identify AD, physicians are now able to accurately diagnose 80 to 90 percent of people who show symptoms of the disease, notes the NIA. Medical histories, physical exams, neurological and mental status assessments, as well as neuroimaging, may be necessary to identify abnormalities in the brain and to rule out other conditions such as head trauma that may resemble AD. A definitive diagnosis is possible only through an examination of brain tissue at autopsy.

Early diagnosis is also advantageous because it gives the person, and loved ones time, to learn about the health changes that accompany the disease and develop a plan to live life as fully as possible while coping with the changes. Local chapters of the Alzheimer's Association have support groups for those with the disorder and for their families and friends. The association provides a wealth of information about everything from completing insurance claims to preparing advance directives.

Treating moderate AD

Physicians often prescribe a cholinesterase inhibitor to treat symptoms of mild to moderate AD. Aricept, Cognex, Exelon and Reminyl work by preventing the breakdown of acetylcholine, a chemical in the brain that facilitates communication between nerve cells. Those with AD have a deficiency of this neurotransmitter and drugs are used to inhibit the enzyme cholinesterase that breaks down the acetylcholine.

As with all drugs, however, cholinesterase inhibitors can cause side effects such as nausea, vomiting and weight loss. They must be monitored carefully when taken in combination with nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen or any form of aspirin: both classes of drugs can cause gastrointestinal problems.

Although no drug can stop the disease, the new agents can, for a limited time — perhaps three to six years after diagnosis — help delay or prevent worsening of symptoms. Clinical trials have demonstrated, for example, that individuals with AD who took Aricept performed better in memory and reasoning assessments than did those who received a placebo.

Moreover, because individuals are better able to function, those with AD who take cholinesterase inhibitors tend to enter nursing homes later than those who do not have a regimen that includes one of these drugs. According to the NIA, some researchers have reported a delay of up to 22 months in admittance to a nursing home. Since nursing home care is expensive, this delay is a great benefit. The Alzheimer's Association estimates that the

average cost for nursing home care in the United States is \$42,000 per year but can exceed \$70,000 or more annually in some areas of the country.

Some with AD enter nursing homes because their families cannot cope with the alterations in mood and behavior that accompany the disease. Individuals may become aggressive and agitated or suffer delusions or hallucinations. Still others wander or develop sleep disturbances.

To cope with behavioral changes, caregivers like Julia use a variety of strategies. She arranged for her mother to participate in an exercise group for people with AD, so that her mom was less agitated and was able to sleep better. An antidepressant prescribed by the doctor lifted Beatrice's spirits, as did playing and listening to music.

"Playing the piano was something my mother and I enjoyed at every stage of our life together, so I'm glad that she still enjoys hearing me play," said Julia.

10 potential warning signs of Alzheimer's disease

1. Memory Loss

One of the most common early signs of dementia is forgetting recently learned information. While it is normal to forget appointments, names or telephone numbers, those with dementia will forget things more often and will not remember them later.

2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks

Individuals with Alzheimer's often find it hard to complete routine tasks. Someone with this disorder may not know the steps for preparing a meal, using a household appliance or participating in a lifelong hobby.

3. Problems with language

Everyone has trouble finding the right word sometimes, but a person with Alzheimer's disease often forgets simple words or substitutes inappropriate or unusual words, making his or her speech or writing hard to understand. If someone is unable to find his or her toothbrush, for example, the individual may ask for "that thing for my mouth."

4. Disorientation in time and place

Perhaps everyone sometimes forgets the day of the week or, momentarily, a destination. Those with AD, however, can become lost on their own street, forget where they are and how they got there, and not know how to get home.

5. Poor or decreased judgment

No one has perfect judgment all the time. Those with AD, however, may dress without regard to the weather, wearing several shirts or blouses on a warm day or very little clothing in cold weather. They may show poor judgment about money, giving away large sums to telemarketers or paying for home repairs or products they don't need.

6. Problems with abstract thinking

Balancing a checkbook can be a challenge for many people. Someone with AD, however, may forget completely what the numbers are, where they go and what needs to be done with them.

7. Misplacing things

Although anyone can temporarily misplace a wallet or key, someone with AD may put things in unusual or inappropriate places — e.g., an iron in the freezer

8. Changes in mood or behavior

We all become sad or moody from time to time, usually for a reason. Someone with AD may demonstrate rapid mood swings — from calm to sad to angry — for no apparent reason.

9. Changes in personality

People's personalities ordinarily change somewhat with age. A person with AD may change a good deal, becoming extremely confused, suspicious, fearful or dependent on a family member.

10. Loss of initiative

While it is normal to tire of housework, business activities or social obligations at times, a person with AD may become very passive, sitting in front of the television for hours, sleeping more than usual or not wanting to engage in regular activities.

Source: Alzheimer's Association

Alzheimer's Links

[What is Alzheimer's Disease?](#)

Over 4 million people in the U.S. have Alzheimer's disease. Learn how Alzheimer's affects the brain and the effect it has on daily life.

[Is It Normal Aging or Alzheimer's?](#)

The first symptoms of Alzheimer's may be hard to tell from the normal signs of aging. Find out how to recognize its early symptoms.

[Treating Alzheimer's](#)

While there is no cure for Alzheimer's, there are treatments. Learn about the #1 prescribed Alzheimer's treatment.

[Caregiving Challenges](#)

A person with Alzheimer's will have changes in their thinking, actions and moods. See how these changes affect daily tasks and how you can help.

[Tips for Caregivers](#)

Caring for someone with Alzheimer's can be a challenge. See why you should keep yourself healthy and ask for help when you need it.

[Helpful Websites & Books](#)

Try to get the right information and know where to go for help. Find out about Alzheimer's resources where you live that can give you support.

[Try the Memory Checklist](#)

See if memory problems you're noticing could be symptoms of Alzheimer's.

[Going to the Doctor](#)

The doctor is the only one who can diagnose Alzheimer's. Find out what to expect at the doctor's office. Learn why it is important to treat it.

[Early Treatment Can Help](#)

Learn about the #1 prescribed Alzheimer's drug.

[Myth vs. Fact Quiz](#)

See if you know the right answers. Look at some popular myths about Alzheimer's.