

Alzheimer *Society*

Alzheimer's disease

# Dispelling the myths



## Myth and Reality

Over the years, many myths have evolved about what Alzheimer's disease is, who gets it and how it affects people who have it. These myths can add to the stigma attached to the disease and stand in the way of our ability to understand and help people with it. At the Alzheimer Society, we believe the sooner we dispel the myths, the better we'll be able to respond to the reality.

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, degenerative disease of the brain. It most often occurs in people over 65, but can affect adults at an earlier age.

**Myth 1** Because someone in my family has Alzheimer's disease, I'm going to get it.

**Reality:** Although genetics play a role in the disease, fewer than seven per cent of cases are associated with genes that cause the early onset inherited familial form of the disease (FAD). The majority of cases are of the late onset "sporadic Alzheimer's disease" form, in which genes do play a role. A person who has a parent or a sibling who has or had sporadic Alzheimer's disease has a very slightly increased risk of getting the disease.

**Myth 2** Alzheimer's disease is a disease that only affects older people.

**Reality:** While age is the most significant known risk factor for Alzheimer's disease, most people in fact do not develop the disease as they age. However, even with the sporadic form of the disease, people have on occasion been diagnosed with it in their 40s and 50s. What's most important to understand is that Alzheimer's disease is not a normal part of aging.

**Myth 3** There is a cure for Alzheimer's disease.

**Reality:** At present there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, but there are medications and other approaches that, in the first few years, can often successfully help with some of the symptoms and improve quality of life. The good news is that researchers have made great strides and there are a number of drugs in clinical trials that act directly against the disease process.

**Myth 4** Memory loss means Alzheimer's disease.

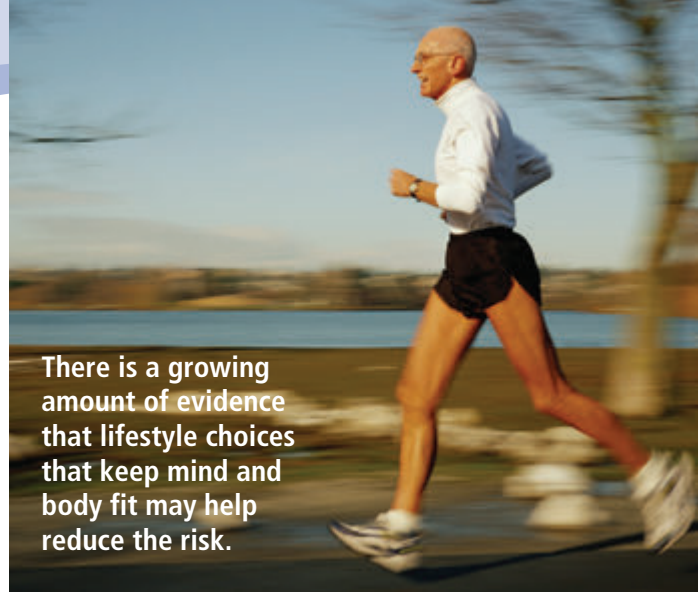
**Reality:** Many people have trouble with their memory as they get older, but that in itself does not mean they have Alzheimer's disease. When memory loss affects day-to-day function, and especially when this is coupled with lack of judgment and reasoning, or changes in communication abilities, it's best to visit a doctor to determine the cause of the symptoms.

**Myth 5** Aluminium causes Alzheimer's disease.

**Reality:** Although there's been much research into the connection between aluminium and Alzheimer's disease, there's no conclusive evidence that aluminum is one of the causes of the disease. The disease appears to develop when the combined effects of many risk factors, including age, genetics, lifestyle and environmental factors, overwhelm the natural capacity of the brain to deal with them.

**Myth 6** Alzheimer's disease is preventable.

**Reality:** There is no single treatment that can prevent Alzheimer's disease. There is, however, a growing amount of evidence that



There is a growing amount of evidence that lifestyle choices that keep mind and body fit may help reduce the risk.

lifestyle choices that keep mind and body fit may help reduce the risk. These choices include being physically active; eating healthily, including fresh fruits, vegetables and fish; keeping your brain challenged; reducing stress, keeping an eye on your blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels; avoiding traumatic brain injury; and staying socially active.

**Myth 7** Vitamins, supplements and memory boosters can prevent Alzheimer's disease.

**Reality:** Many studies have been done to test the effectiveness of products such as vitamins E, B, and C, ginkgo biloba, folate, and selenium in preventing Alzheimer's disease. The findings are mixed and inconclusive. However, research in this area is ongoing.

**Myth 8** If I'm diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, my life is over.

**Reality:** Many people with the disease live meaningful active lives for quite a number of years. They have a sense of purpose and

do not feel their lives are over. Research indicates that making healthy lifestyle choices can help to slow the progression of the disease. Earlier diagnosis and medications are helping. It is also important to have access to services and activities for people with the disease to optimize their quality of life.

**Myth 9** All people who have Alzheimer's disease become violent and aggressive.

**Reality:** Alzheimer's disease affects each person differently, and certainly not all become aggressive. For the person with Alzheimer's disease, the loss of memory and the resulting confusion are often frustrating or even frightening. By learning about the disease, adapting the person's surroundings and changing the way we communicate with the person, aggressive and often adverse responses may well become preventable.

**Myth 10** People with Alzheimer's disease cannot understand what is going on around them.

**Reality:** Some people with Alzheimer's disease understand what is going on around them; others have difficulty. The disease does affect a person's ability to communicate and make sense of the world around them, although it affects each person differently. Quite possibly, there is a degree of understanding that cannot be recognized because of this inability to communicate. When we assume someone does not understand, feelings can be hurt unintentionally. The fact is a person with Alzheimer's disease is still the same person as before and needs to be treated with dignity and respect.

## Putting an end to the myths

At the Alzheimer Society, we would like to put an end to the myths surrounding Alzheimer's disease.

### Get the Facts:

- learn about the disease;
- seek help;
- treat people with the disease with respect.

The Alzheimer Society is the leading nationwide health charity for people living with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Active in communities across Canada, the Society:

- offers information, support and education programs for people with dementia, their families and caregivers
- funds research to find a cure and improve the care of people with dementia
- promotes public education and awareness of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias to ensure people know where to turn for help
- influences policy and decision-making to address the needs of people with Alzheimer's and their caregivers

For more information, contact your local Alzheimer Society or visit our website at [www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca).

**Help for Today. Hope for Tomorrow...<sup>®</sup>**

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# Alzheimer Society

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Charitable registration number: 11878 4925 RR0001