

How Do I Get My Relative Diagnosed?

Value of early diagnosis and tips on starting the conversation with the person

Value of early diagnosis

Alzheimer's disease is the leading cause of dementia - a set of symptoms that includes loss of memory, judgment and reasoning, difficulty with day to day function and changes in mood and behaviour. Symptoms of Alzheimer's disease can be similar to symptoms of other conditions such as strokes, depression, thyroid or heart disease infections, nutritional deficiencies, and drug interactions or alcohol abuse. Many of these conditions can be treated. The earlier a treatment can be given, the better the result. Finding out the cause of the symptoms can help people:

- Understand the source of the symptoms
- Get the proper care and treatment
- Access advice, information and support
- Plan for the future

Where to begin

Making a diagnosis of dementia can take time. There is currently no single test that can tell if a person has Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia. A thorough systematic assessment will be carried out in order to eliminate other possible causes. The time it takes to make a diagnosis can vary. If scans and other investigations are required, it could be four to twelve weeks, depending on waiting lists. If the person is in the early stages of dementia, a six to twelve month period of monitoring may be required before a diagnosis can be made.

The diagnosis can be made in a family doctor's office, a memory clinic, a hospital or in the person's home. After considering the symptoms, carrying out a physical examination, ordering screening tests such as

blood and urine tests as well as asking questions designed to test thinking and memory, the health care professional may offer a preliminary diagnosis or refer the person to a specialist to help make the diagnosis. Even if the health care professional does not suggest further assessment by a specialist, you can ask for a referral to a memory clinic or other specialist service for a second opinion.

The referral may be made to a psychologist, psychiatrist, neurologist, geriatrician, nurse, social worker or occupational therapist. These specialists will have more specialized knowledge and experience of dementia and will have access to more specialized investigations, such as brain scans and memory testing. They will look for problems with the person's memory, reasoning ability, language and judgment, and how these affect day-to-day function.

How to start the conversation

Sometimes the person experiencing the symptoms will suggest themselves that they need to get an assessment. For others, they may be resistant to the idea of visiting a health care professional. The reasons for this will vary but the more common reasons are:

- They may not realize, or deny, that there is anything wrong with them. This can be due to the brain changes of dementia that interfere with the ability to recognise or appreciate one's memory problems.
- They may be afraid of having their fears confirmed.

One of the most effective ways to overcome this problem is to find another reason to get an assessment from a health care professional.

- Perhaps suggest an examination of the heart, a blood pressure check or a review of long-term medication.
- Suggest that it is time for both of you to have a physical check-up.
- If unable to get the person to a health care professional's office, you can call the Community Care Access Centre and ask for someone to come into the home to do an assessment.

Ways to facilitate the assessment

Once you have managed to get agreement for an assessment, there are ways that you can facilitate the process.

- Make the appointment for the person.
- Alert the health care professional's office ahead of time that you are concerned about the symptoms that have developed and that the person is reluctant to go for an assessment.
- Help with transportation and offer to accompany the person to appointments and tests.
- Share information with other family members.
- Write down the symptoms and their history ahead of time so that you can share this information at the first appointment.

Be sure to provide a lot of reassurance. This can be an unsettling time for the person and they will need emotional support. Try to remain calm with a caring attitude and remember to have patience. It can take a long period of time to arrive at a diagnosis.

If you are having difficulty in getting the person to agree to an assessment, it might help to talk with others who have gone through similar circumstances.

A call to your local Alzheimer Society will connect you to someone for you to talk with and could provide alternative strategies for your consideration.

Further information on this topic

Visit the following websites:

- www.alzheimer.ca
- www.alzheimers.org.uk
- www.alzheimers.org.au

Alzheimer Society

The Alzheimer Society offers information, education and support.

- **Ottawa and Renfrew County:**
613-523-4004 / 1-888-411-2067
www.alzheimer.ca/ottawa
- **Cornwall & District:**
613-932-4914
www.alzheimer.ca/cornwall

This fact sheet was provided courtesy of the Alzheimer Society of Ottawa and Renfrew County