Information for health-care professionals

The importance of early diagnosis

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Our website provides updated information on:
• Recommended cognitive screening tests
• Questions to ask when cognitive impairment is suspected
• Principles of a dignified diagnosis
• Communicating a diagnosis
• Tools and resources for post-diagnosis follow-up
• Alzheimer’s disease progression series
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After the diagnosis

Referral to the Alzheimer Society for support and services

People diagnosed with dementia, their caregivers and the health-care professionals who support them all recognize that early access to ongoing, reliable support and information is critical when living with the many challenges that dementia can bring.

To address this need, the Alzheimer Society developed First Link®, a referral program for physicians, health and community services providers that connects individuals and their caregivers to learning, services and support as early as possible. For more information, visit alzheimer.ca/firstlink.

Physicians have an important role in identifying caregiver challenges and providing direct and ongoing support to caregivers in their day-to-day responsibilities.

People living with dementia and caregivers want to know about the progression of dementia, risk factors, and available treatments.

As a physician, you can:
• Ensure regular follow-up visits to assess their physical and emotional health and coping skills;
• Provide further communication about the diagnosis and information during the whole course of dementia, particularly when managing symptoms;
• Assist caregivers in mobilizing family and friends;
• Facilitate referrals to appropriate services and resources.

The Alzheimer Society strongly recommends that people who are concerned about their memory and cognitive health see a physician. Those who do not have a family physician should contact their local Alzheimer Society to learn more about dementia, how to find resources for appropriate diagnosis, treatment and care within their community.
About Dementia

• Alzheimer’s disease and vascular dementia are two common forms of dementia.
• There are many other types of dementia including Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and mixed dementia.

Dementia numbers in Canada

• As of 2024, it is estimated that 733,040 people are living with dementia in Canada. By 2030, we can expect this number will reach close to 1 million.
• In 2020, an estimated 61.8% of persons living with dementia (352,000) in Canada were female.
• In 2020, there were 124,000 new cases of dementia diagnosed (10,333 per month).
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• Billions of dollars are spent on health-care costs and out-of-pocket individual and caregiver expenses in supporting people living with dementia in Canada.

Encouraging early diagnosis

Benefits of early diagnosis

• Early diagnosis allows people living with dementia and their caregivers to receive timely practical information, advice and support.
• When people receive a diagnosis they can access available drug and non-drug therapies that may improve their cognition and enhance their quality of life.
• Early therapeutic interventions can be effective in improving cognitive function, treating depression, improving caregiver mood, and delaying a move to long-term care. Some of these interventions may be more effective when started early.
• Undetected dementia places people at risk for delirium, motor vehicle accidents, medication errors and financial difficulties to name a few.
• Early detection of dementia provides an opportunity for the individual to adjust to the diagnosis and to participate actively in planning for the future. This can reduce the heavy societal costs associated with dementia care and support.

The story of Jim Mann

In 2007, Jim Mann, a former airline employee who had traveled the world, froze in the middle of a small regional airport. He had no idea where he was, or what to do next.

After a few tests, Jim’s doctor told him he had dementia. After more rigorous testing, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. He was 58 years old.

Jim was lucky. He had been seeing the same doctor for years. When he described his symptoms, the doctor knew they were unusual for Jim. When he went for more extensive testing, however, one specialist questioned the diagnosis, saying, “You don’t look like you have Alzheimer’s disease.”

“I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to look”, says Jim. “Since then, I’ve been told I’m too young, too healthy, too capable to have the disease. It can be a hidden illness for years, but when you have it, the impact is unquestionable.”

He recommends being persistent to get the answers needed. “When you know something is wrong, it’s important to push until you are satisfied. The answer may be frightening, but it’s better to have a diagnosis, find out what help is available and have time to plan for the future with family members and caregivers.”

In 2020, at least 28,000 people under the age of 65 were living with young onset dementia in Canada. These individuals face additional challenges as they may still be in the workforce, have considerable financial commitments and dependent children. A timely diagnosis of young onset dementia is an important prerequisite for beginning adequate treatment, planning for the future, and accessing support services appropriate for that age group.

Assessment

Early detection of cognitive impairment

Although primary care physicians are in an ideal position to diagnose dementia, cognitive impairment is often unrecognized by family physicians. Many barriers to recognition have been identified, such as lack of knowledge about dementia, lack of symptom recognition and belief that early detection increases patient and caregiver distress.

The major hurdles to diagnosing dementia in family practice are:
• the complexity of the diagnostic process;
• physicians’ lack of familiarity with dementia screening;
• the pressures of time (the diagnostic process can require multiple visits to complete);
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To address these challenges, Drs. Masellis and Black developed a tool outlining questions to help family physicians detect early signs of dementia entitled Questions to Ask when Dementia is Suspected. This resource available for download at alzheimer.ca/healthcareprofessionals.

A dignified diagnosis

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Toronto, Ontario  M4R 1K8
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Information and Referrals: 1-855-705-4636 (INFO)
info@alzheimer.ca  alzheimer.ca
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Charitable registration number: 11878 4925 RR0001

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