

The Importance of Early Diagnosis **By: Danielle Vernon, Client Support Coordinator**

Speaking to your doctor about your concerns, when they are first noticed is important because there are a number of conditions such as depression, thyroid disease, infections or adverse drug reactions that can cause symptoms very similar to dementia, but are also treatable and/or reversible.

Receiving a diagnosis of dementia can be upsetting at first, but if obtained early in the progression of the condition, can lead to better quality of life in the future. Determining the cause of memory difficulties and changes in behaviour can begin the process of accessing treatment and support that will allow the person with dementia to maintain independence for many years. Caregivers can also begin to educate themselves with the necessary information to be more effective in their care giving role. The Alzheimer Society of Canada has compiled a “Top 10” list of benefits to an early diagnosis. Some of these include:

- **Using medications effectively** - Treatment of Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias is typically most effective when started early in the disease process.
- **Making choices is empowering** – An early diagnosis allows the person with dementia to make informed decisions about legal, financial and care matters; and make their wishes known to their loved ones.
- **Supporting families** – Families who understand the disease and the challenges that come with its progression are better able to support the person with dementia and get the help that’s right for them
- **Focusing on what’s important** – An early diagnosis allows the person to set priorities based on what is important to them, such as travelling, pursuing new goals, or deciding when to stop working.

For a full list of the Alzheimer Society of Canada’s top 10 benefits of an early diagnosis visit: http://www.alzheimer.ca/~media/Files/national/AW2014/benefits_of_early_diagnosis_e.pdf

Getting an accurate diagnosis of dementia is a process that can take varying lengths of time. Typically it will begin with a visit to your family doctor for some initial testing that may include a family history, physical exam, mental status exam, blood work and other laboratory tests. You may or may not be referred to other specialists or health care professionals. There is no single test that can determine if a person has Alzheimer’s disease or a related dementia. The diagnosis is usually arrived at through a combination of laboratory and imaging tests, cognitive assessments, symptom presentation, and elimination of all other possible causes (Alzheimer Society of Canada).

You may find it helpful to prepare in advance of your doctor’s visit. Keeping a journal of symptoms and concerning episodes can be useful. Often symptoms can occur that you are not aware are related to dementia. The Alzheimer Society has a check list you can fill out that will

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help communicate the symptoms you are experiencing to your doctor. To review this document click on this link:

http://www.alzheimer.ca/pklnh/~media/Files/national/Tipsheets/tipsheet_Preparingforyourdoctor_e.pdf

This may be a stressful and frustrating process and there can be barriers to an early diagnosis. Initially, there may not be a significant impact to your daily life and you may find that family or physicians do not always share your concerns, due to lack of knowledge about dementia care or belief that early detection increases patient and caregiver stress. This can result in delaying treatment, or conducting testing that could establish a baseline (The Murray Alzheimer Research and Education Program, 2011). Perseverance may be necessary to ensure that your concerns are properly acknowledged. The Alzheimer Society of Canada has prepared a tip sheet written by people with Alzheimer's disease entitled "The Principles of a Dignified Diagnosis". This statement discusses ways in which people can require health professionals to communicate with them, to help improve the process of receiving a diagnosis. To review this document click on this link:

http://www.alzheimer.ca/~media/Files/national/Tipsheets/tipsheet_dignified_diagnosis_2012_E.pdf

For further information and support in regard to obtaining a diagnosis in the early stages of dementia please contact the Alzheimer Society; our Client Support Coordinators will be happy to assist you.

Sources

Alzheimer Society of Canada. (n.d.). *Getting a diagnosis*. Retrieved 08 25, 2014, from http://www.alzheimer.ca/~media/Files/national/Core-lit-brochures/Getting_a_Diagnosis_e.pdf
The Murray Alzheimer Research and Education Program. (2011). *Before/early diagnosis*. University of Waterloo.