

Alzheimer *Society*

Alzheimer's disease

# Getting a diagnosis



Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, degenerative disease of the brain.

Symptoms include loss of memory, judgment and reasoning; difficulty with day-to-day tasks; and changes in communication abilities, mood and behaviour.

If you notice any of these symptoms, it is important to see your doctor.



## Why find out?

Symptoms of Alzheimer's disease can be similar to symptoms of other conditions such as depression, thyroid or heart disease, infections, drug interactions or alcohol abuse.

Finding out the cause of the symptoms can help you:

- Understand the cause of the symptoms
- Get the proper care, treatment and support
- Plan for the future

The earlier a treatment can be given, the better the result.

## Getting a diagnosis

No single test can tell if a person has Alzheimer's disease. The diagnosis is made through a systematic assessment that eliminates other possible causes. Until there is a conclusive test, doctors may continue to use the words "probable Alzheimer's disease."

Making the diagnosis can take time. The diagnosis can be made by a family doctor or a specialist. When making the diagnosis, the doctor may or may not refer you to other health-care professionals. These may include a psychologist, psychiatrist, neurologist, geriatrician, nurse, social worker or occupational therapist. They will look for problems with your memory, reasoning ability, language and judgment, and how these affect day-to-day function.

## **The diagnostic process involves:**

### **Medical history**

Both you and your family members or friends will be asked questions regarding your symptoms now and in the past. There will be questions about past illnesses and about family medical and psychiatric history.

### **Mental status exam**

This part of the process tests your sense of time and place as well as the ability to remember, express yourself and do simple calculations. It may involve exercises such as recalling words and objects, drawing and spelling, and questions such as "What year is it?"

### **Physical exam**

To help rule out other causes, a physical exam will be done. The doctor will look for heart, lung, liver, kidney or thyroid problems that may be causing the symptoms. To evaluate whether other nervous system disorders are causing the symptoms, the doctor will test muscle tone and strength, co-ordination, eye movement, speech and sensation.

### **Laboratory tests**

Detailed blood work will be ordered to help detect problems such as anemia, diabetes, thyroid problems or infections that might be contributing to the symptoms.

Other tests such as X-rays and EEGs (electroencephalogram) may be used to determine the source of the problem. In some medical centres, scans may be used.

The following may be recommended, but are not always necessary for a diagnosis:

**CT** (computerized tomography) scan and **MRI** (magnetic resonance imaging) take images of the brain.

**SPECT** (single proton emission computed tomography) shows how blood is circulating to the brain.

**PET** (positive electron tomography) shows how the different areas of the brain respond during certain activities such as reading and talking, but this scan is usually done after 45 minutes of rest.

### **Psychiatric and psychological evaluations**

A psychiatric evaluation may be helpful in ruling out other illnesses such as depression, which can cause symptoms similar to Alzheimer's disease. Neuro-psychological testing can evaluate memory, reasoning and writing.

### **Preparing for the assessment**

On the day of the appointment, write the following information down and bring it with you.

#### **Things you will be asked:**

- What symptoms have been noticed?
- When did they first appear?
- How have the symptoms changed over time?
- What other medical conditions exist?
- What medications are currently being taken (both prescription and over-the-counter)?



- What herbal remedies and/or dietary supplements are currently being taken?
- Is there a family history of Alzheimer's disease or psychiatric conditions?

#### **Things you may want to ask:**

- Which tests will be performed?
- What is involved in the tests?
- How long will the tests take?
- How long will it take to learn the results?
- How are the results communicated? Who will be involved?

*"It may be helpful to have a family member or friend accompany you to appointments and tests. Think about whom you would like to invite and talk to them about how they can help."*

## The role of friends and family

If you are a family member or friend, you may be the one who alerts the doctor of a problem.

### Tips to lend a hand:

- Make the appointment for the person, if he wishes.
- Help with transportation.
- Share this brochure with other family members.
- Offer to accompany the person to appointments and tests.
- Help prepare information for the first appointment.
- Appreciate that this can be an unsettling time for the person and provide emotional support.
- Have patience; it can take a long period of time to arrive at a diagnosis.

## If the diagnosis is Alzheimer's disease

You may want to ask:

- What does the diagnosis mean?
- What can be expected over time?
- What care will be needed and is available, now and in the future?
- What treatment is available? What are the risks and benefits?
- What resources are available in the community to help?
- Are there any experimental drug trials to participate in?
- When is the next appointment?

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 dementia 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 of Canada  
20 Eglinton Avenue West, 16th Floor, Toronto, Ontario, M4R 1K8  
Tel: 416-488-8772 1-800-616-8816 Fax: 416-322-6656  
Email: [info@alzheimer.ca](mailto:info@alzheimer.ca) Website: [www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca)  
Facebook: [facebook.com/AlzheimerCanada](https://facebook.com/AlzheimerCanada)  
Twitter: [twitter.com/AlzCanada](https://twitter.com/AlzCanada)

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