

Learning about the disease

Learning what you can about Alzheimer's disease and how it progresses may help you adjust to the changes that you are experiencing. The changes are due to the disease; they are not your fault. Some of what you learn may be overwhelming. Learn only as much as you feel you can. Encourage your family members and friends to also learn about Alzheimer's disease. Your family doctor and the local Alzheimer Society are good sources of information.

Some questions you may have about Alzheimer's disease

What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease is the most common of a large group of disorders known as "dementias." It is a disease of the brain, characterized by deterioration of thinking ability and of memory, caused by the progressive degeneration of brain cells. The disease also affects mood and emotions, behaviour and one's ability to perform activities of daily living. There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease at present nor can its progression be reversed. However, current treatment options and lifestyle choices can often significantly slow the progression of the disease. Other dementias include Vascular dementia, Frontotemporal dementia, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and Lewy body dementia. For more information on other dementias, contact the Alzheimer Society or visit our website (www.alzheimer.ca).

What causes Alzheimer's disease?

We do not yet know what causes Alzheimer's disease but researchers have identified risk factors associated with it.

Age: Alzheimer's disease usually affects people over the age of 65, although people may be diagnosed at an earlier age. The older you are, the greater the risk.

Family history: People with a parent, brother or sister with Alzheimer's disease may have a slightly greater chance of developing the disease than those with no family history.

Other factors: Research is being done on other factors such as existing diseases or conditions that the person may have, infections, toxins in the environment, education level, alcohol and tobacco use, diet and exercise.

Are there treatments for Alzheimer's disease symptoms?

Several medications are now available to treat some of the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. These medications seem to slow down the decline in memory, language and thinking abilities.

The treatments work for some people. These drugs are not a cure for the disease. They do not stop its progression. Ask your doctor what is available, and if there is a treatment suitable for you.

Why did I get Alzheimer's disease?

There is no easy answer to this question. Researchers do not know the cause of Alzheimer's disease. They do not know if it is caused by a single factor or a combination of factors.

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Will my children get Alzheimer's disease?

The majority of people with the disease have a common form called sporadic Alzheimer's disease. Researchers are trying to determine what role heredity plays in this form.

A very small percentage of people have an inherited form of the disease. This rare form is called familial autosomal dominant Alzheimer's disease. In certain families, it passes directly from one generation to another. Having more than one family member with Alzheimer's disease does not necessarily mean that your family has the inherited form.

Is there genetic testing for Alzheimer's disease?

Genetic testing for the disease is not widely available in Canada. It is usually limited to people with a strong family history of the disease who are enrolled in specific research studies. Some testing is also done on referral from a family physician. You cannot request genetic testing on behalf of another family member.

How does Alzheimer's disease progress?

While the progression of the disease varies from person to person, it usually follows some predictable stages. The average length of the disease is between seven to 10 years, but some people may have it for a longer or shorter time.

To learn about how Alzheimer's disease progresses, please refer to our Progression series (Overview, Early stage, Middle stage, Late stage, End of life). It is available from the Alzheimer Society or online at www.alzheimer.ca/stages.

How do I live with Alzheimer's disease?

Keeping stimulated, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, living one day at a time, and doing the things that you enjoy are just some of the ways to live well with Alzheimer's disease.

While abilities will change as the disease progresses, learning to adapt to changes can help to maintain your quality of life for as long as possible. Many people are ready and willing to offer you support – family members, friends and your local Alzheimer Society.

Practical tips for daily living with Alzheimer's disease

We asked people living with Alzheimer's disease for some practical tips for daily living. Here are some of their suggestions:

"Do one thing at a time."

"Write things down."

"Follow routines."

"Stay away from large crowds."

"Avoid overstimulation."

"If you forget something, don't dwell on it."

"If you are having problems with one activity,
try something else."

"Ask someone to help."

"Use a dispenser for pills."

"Set the timer when using the stove or oven."

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Add tips that work for you: _____

Additional resources

To learn more about Alzheimer's disease, please refer to the following print materials. These are available from the Alzheimer Society or visit our website at www.alzheimer.ca.

- *What is Alzheimer's disease?*
- *Risk factors*
- *Understanding genetics and Alzheimer's disease*
- *Progression series*