

UNDERSTANDING ALZHEIMER'S AND DEMENTIA

THE IMPACT OF ALZHEIMER'S AND DEMENTIA

Currently, over 55 million people worldwide are living with Alzheimer's or another dementia, including more than 6 million Americans. Without changes in prevention or treatment, this number will nearly triple by 2050.

The disease also affects the more than 11 million Americans who provide unpaid care for people living with Alzheimer's or another dementia.

The Alzheimer's Association® is available across the country and online to help people understand Alzheimer's and dementia, and receive information and support they can trust.

ALZHEIMER'S AND DEMENTIA

The terms “dementia” and “Alzheimer's” are often used as though they mean the same thing. They are related, but there are important differences between the two.

Dementia

Dementia is a broad (“umbrella”) term for an individual's changes in memory, thinking or reasoning. There are many possible causes of dementia, including Alzheimer's.

Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. It is not a normal part of aging — it's a progressive brain disease, meaning it gets worse over time.

Two abnormal brain structures called plaques and tangles are the main features of Alzheimer's disease. Scientists believe they damage and kill nerve cells. Plaques are pieces of a protein fragment called beta-amyloid that build up in the spaces between nerve cells. Tangles are twisted fibers of another protein called tau that build up inside cells.

Other common dementias

- **Vascular dementia** is a decline in thinking skills that happens when blood flow to the brain is blocked or reduced so that brain cells can't get important oxygen and nutrients. Sometimes these changes occur suddenly, such as

during a stroke that blocks major brain blood vessels. Vascular dementia is the second most common cause of dementia after Alzheimer's disease.

- **Lewy body dementia (LBD)** is a type of progressive dementia related to buildup of a protein called alpha-synuclein that damages brain cells. Early symptoms include hallucinations and sleep problems.
- **Frontotemporal dementia (FTD)** is a group of disorders. Progressive cell degeneration (or breakdown) causes FTD in two places. One is in the brain's frontal lobes (the areas behind the forehead). The other is in the brain's temporal lobes (the regions behind the ears).

Visit alz.org/dementia to learn about other types of dementia.

ALZHEIMER'S IN THE BRAIN

More than 100 years ago, Dr. Alois Alzheimer described specific changes in the brain. Scientists now call them beta-amyloid plaques and tau tangles. Today we know that Alzheimer's is a progressive brain disease. It is marked by these key changes and impacts memory, thinking and behavior.

What goes wrong in the brain

The brain has three main parts: the cerebrum, cerebellum and brain stem. Each has a job to do to make the body work properly.

The cerebrum fills up most of the skull. It's the part of the brain most involved in remembering, problem-solving and thinking. There are about 100 billion nerve cells called neurons throughout the brain that send messages in order to make memories, feelings and thoughts.

Alzheimer's disease causes nerve cells to die. This causes the brain to lose tissue (also called shrinkage) and the loss of function and communication between cells. These changes can cause the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. These include memory loss; problems with thinking and planning; behavioral issues; and, in the last stage, a further decline in functioning, which can even include trouble swallowing.

Visit alz.org/brain to explore *Inside the Brain: A Tour of How the Mind Works*.

RISK FACTORS

Scientists know that nerve cell failure is a part of Alzheimer's disease, but they don't yet know why this happens. However, they have identified certain risk factors that increase the likelihood of developing Alzheimer's.

Age

The greatest known risk factor for Alzheimer's is age. After age 65, a person's risk of developing the disease doubles every five years. Thirty-three percent of people age 85 or older have Alzheimer's.

Family history

Researchers have learned that people who have a parent or sibling with Alzheimer's are more likely to develop it than those who do not. The risk is due to shared genetic, environmental and lifestyle factors, and increases if more than one family member has the disease.

Genetics

Two types of genes may influence whether a person develops a disease: risk genes and deterministic genes. Risk genes increase the chance of developing a disease but do not guarantee it will happen. Deterministic genes cause a disease. This means anyone who inherits a deterministic gene will develop a disorder.

Rare deterministic genes cause Alzheimer's in a few hundred extended families worldwide. Scientists estimate these genes cause less than 1% of cases. Individuals with these genes usually develop symptoms in their 40s or 50s.

Ethnicity, race and sex

Research shows that Hispanic older adults are about one-and-a-half times as likely as White older adults to have Alzheimer's and other dementias, while Black older adults are about twice as likely.

No one knows the exact reason for these differences, but researchers believe the connection may be due to higher rates of cardiovascular disease in these groups — and likely other contributing factors, such as health and socioeconomic disparities. Scientists need to learn more about other potential causes behind this increased risk. To do so, it is critically important to increase the participation of individuals from underrepresented communities in clinical research.

Also, women live longer than men, making them more likely to develop Alzheimer's. However, longevity doesn't completely explain this difference. Researchers are exploring how biological, social and cultural differences in women may impact disease risk.

Lowering the risk of cognitive decline

Age, family history and genetics are all risk factors we can't change. However, research is starting to show there are lifestyle habits that may help keep your brain healthy and lower your risk of cognitive decline.

Science tells us there is a strong connection between brain health and heart health. The risk of developing Alzheimer's or vascular dementia appears to be increased by many conditions that damage the heart and blood vessels. These include high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke and obesity. Therefore, eating a balanced, heart-healthy diet and getting regular exercise may benefit both your heart and your brain.

Other healthy lifestyle habits that may also be good for your brain include avoiding tobacco and excess alcohol, regularly getting a good night's sleep, and staying socially and mentally active.

Science also shows a strong connection between serious head injury and future risk of cognitive decline. For this reason, it's important to protect your head by buckling your seat belt and taking home safety measures to help prevent falls.

STAGES OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Alzheimer's disease progresses in stages with a range of symptoms that increase in severity over time.

Because the disease affects people in different ways, the rate of progression will vary. On average, a person with Alzheimer's may live four to eight years after diagnosis, but some people live as long as 20 years.

The following descriptions provide a general idea of changes at each stage. Stages of Alzheimer's may overlap, which can make it difficult to know which stage a person is in.

Asymptomatic

On the earliest end of the continuum are people who are asymptomatic (i.e., without symptoms). This means that they may have the biological changes of the disease in their brain but do not show any cognitive symptoms.

Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) due to Alzheimer's disease

Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) is an early stage of memory loss or other loss of cognitive ability in individuals who can still independently perform most activities of daily living. MCI can develop for multiple reasons, and some individuals living with MCI may go on to develop dementia while others will not. MCI can be an early stage of Alzheimer's disease if hallmark changes in the brain, such as beta-amyloid buildup, are present. Symptoms of MCI can include:

- Forgetting important information such as appointments, conversations or recent events.

- Difficulty with making sound decisions, judging the time or recalling a sequence of steps needed to complete a complex task.

Early stage (mild dementia due to Alzheimer's disease)

If hallmark changes in the brain are present, the person may progress into dementia due to Alzheimer's disease. Dementia due to Alzheimer's disease can be further divided into three stages: early, middle and late — with a progressive loss of independence in each stage.

A person in the early stage will typically start to experience symptoms that interfere with some daily activities, such as:

- Problems coming up with the right word or name for something.
- Trouble remembering names when introduced to new people.
- Difficulty with familiar tasks.
- Forgetting something that was just read.
- Getting lost in familiar places.
- Increasing trouble with planning or organizing.

Middle stage (moderate dementia due to Alzheimer's disease)

In the middle stage, symptoms are more pronounced and will interfere with many of the person's daily activities. This is typically the longest stage of the disease and can last for many years. Challenges can include:

- Forgetting events or one's own personal history.
- Feeling frustrated, angry or withdrawn, especially in socially or mentally challenging situations.
- Confusion about where they are or the day of the week.
- Trouble controlling bladder and bowels.
- Needing help to choose the right clothes for the weather or occasion.
- Changes in sleep patterns, such as sleeping during the day and restlessness at night.
- A higher risk of wandering and becoming lost.
- Personality and behavioral changes, such as becoming suspicious or delusional, believing that others are lying, or, repeating a behavior over and over.

Late stage (severe dementia due to Alzheimer's disease)

In the late stage, major personality changes can occur, and a person will experience symptoms that interfere with most daily activities. The person will need a lot of help with personal care.

In this stage, individuals may:

- Lose awareness of recent experiences as well as of their surroundings.
- Go through changes in physical abilities. This may affect their ability to walk, sit and, eventually, swallow.
- Have more trouble communicating.
- Be at higher risk of infections, especially pneumonia.

FDA-APPROVED TREATMENTS

Currently, there is no cure for Alzheimer's. There are drug and non-drug options available that may help lessen some symptoms temporarily. There is also another drug that treats the underlying biology of the disease. When considering any treatment, it's important to have a conversation with your doctor.

Non-drug treatments

Non-drug treatments for dementia related behaviors can offer physical and emotional comfort. Many of these strategies aim to identify and take care of the needs of the person living with Alzheimer's.

Tips for coping with symptoms include:

- Check for personal comfort. Look for pain, hunger, thirst, constipation, full bladder, fatigue, infections and skin irritation. Keep the room temperature comfortable.
- Don't argue about facts. For example, if a person would like to visit a parent who died years ago, don't point out that the parent is no longer alive. Instead, say, "Your mother is a wonderful person. I would like to see her, too."
- Redirect the person's attention by getting them to think about something new. Try to be flexible, patient and supportive. Respond to the emotion, not the behavior.
- Create a calm environment. Avoid noise, bright lights and television, which causes distraction.
- Have rest times between lively events.
- Give the person an object to hold that makes them feel safe.
- Show the person that you hear them and answer his or her questions.

- Look for reasons behind each behavior. Talk to a doctor about behaviors that could be connected to medications or illness.
- Try to find more than one solution for the issue the person is experiencing.

FDA-approved drugs for Alzheimer’s disease

The following Alzheimer’s treatments help temporarily lessen some symptoms. However, they do not treat the underlying cause of the disease.

Drugs that treat symptoms:

- Donepezil (**Aricept®**), Rivastigmine (**Exelon®**) and Galantamine (**Razadyne®**) are cholinesterase inhibitors, which treat symptoms related to memory, thinking, language, judgment and other thought processes.
- Memantine (**Namenda®**) works by regulating the activity of glutamate, a different chemical messenger that helps the brain process information.
- Donepezil and memantine (**Namzaric®**) is a combination of a cholinesterase inhibitor and a glutamate regulator.
- Suvorexant (**Belsomra®**) treats insomnia in people living with Alzheimer’s disease by regulating the activity of a neurotransmitter involved in the sleep-wake cycle.

DRUG NAME	BRAND NAME	APPROVED FOR	POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS
1. Donepezil	Aricept®	Mild to severe dementia due to Alzheimer’s	Nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, muscle cramps, increased frequency of bowel movements
2. Galantamine	Razadyne®	Mild to moderate dementia due to Alzheimer’s	Nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, increased frequency of bowel movements
3. Rivastigmine	Exelon®	Mild to moderate dementia due to Alzheimer’s	Nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, increased frequency of bowel movements
4. Memantine	Namenda®	Moderate to severe dementia due to Alzheimer’s	Headache, constipation, confusion, dizziness
5. Donepezil and memantine	Namzaric®	Moderate to severe dementia due to Alzheimer’s	Nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, increased frequency of bowel movements, headache, constipation, confusion, dizziness
6. Suvorexant	Belsomra®	Insomnia, has been shown to be effective in people	Impaired alertness and motor coordination, worsening of

		living with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease	depression or suicidal thinking, complex sleep behaviors, sleep paralysis, compromised respiratory function
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Note: Some treatments are available as a pill or patch, talk to your doctor to determine which form is best for you.

As Alzheimer's progresses, brain cells die and connections among cells are lost, causing cognitive and behavioral symptoms to worsen. While these medications do not stop the damage Alzheimer's causes to brain cells, they may help lessen or stabilize symptoms for a limited time.

These treatments produce different results in different people. They might help symptoms for a while, but they do not slow or stop the brain changes that cause Alzheimer's to become more severe over time.

Drugs that may change disease progression:

In June 2021, aducanumab (Aduhelm™) was granted accelerated approval by the FDA for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. Accelerated approval is a process that allows for earlier approval of drugs that treat serious conditions, and that fill an unmet medical need. While not a cure, aducanumab is the first treatment that addresses the underlying biology of Alzheimer's disease, rather than temporarily lessening symptoms.

This drug targets and reduces amyloid plaques — one of the hallmarks of Alzheimer's — in the brains of individuals with the disease. The FDA determined that this reduction is reasonably likely to reduce cognitive and functional decline in people living with early Alzheimer's disease.

People living with early Alzheimer's disease (meaning MCI due to Alzheimer's disease or mild dementia due to Alzheimer's disease) who also have evidence of a buildup of amyloid plaques in the brain may be candidates for this drug. The most common side effects of aducanumab include amyloid-related imaging abnormalities (ARIA), headache and fall. When considering any treatment, it is important to have a conversation with your doctor. Medicare coverage and access to aducanumab is limited.

Visit [alz.org/medications](https://www.alz.org/medications) to learn more.

ADVANCING ALZHEIMER'S RESEARCH

Research shows that Alzheimer's starts many years before people living with the disease notice symptoms. With this knowledge, researchers are working to identify people who are most at risk before symptoms appear, and driving the effort to develop treatments to slow, stop or prevent the disease.

As the world's largest nonprofit funder of dementia research, the Alzheimer's Association has played a vital role in every significant development in Alzheimer's science, and paves the way for future progress.

Clinical studies drive progress

Taking part in a clinical study is one way that anyone can help fight Alzheimer's disease. Without volunteers for research, scientists cannot find ways to prevent, treat and, ultimately, cure the disease. It's important that people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds participate in clinical research so that any treatments discovered work for all populations.

Some clinical studies involve drugs and physical tests, while others involve observation and questionnaires. Every clinical study gives us important knowledge, whether or not the study was successful.

For people living with dementia, there are other benefits to taking part in clinical studies, including access to expert medical care and promising treatments.

Visit alz.org/TrialMatch to learn more about Alzheimer's Association TrialMatch®, a free service that provides customized lists of clinical studies based on user-provided information. The easy-to-use platform allows people living with dementia, caregivers and healthy volunteers to find studies and actively fight against the disease. Search for studies, sign up for study updates, or connect with researcher teams with the click of a button.

TS-0069 | Updated September 2022