

Mental Health Matters

Plain Talk about Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia



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Dementia is a syndrome of progressive decline in intellectual abilities, causing cognitive and functional deterioration leading to impairment of social and occupational functioning. It generally characterized by confusion, memory loss, and disorientation. It should be stressed that a minority of older Americans suffer from dementia – it is *not* an inevitable part of growing old.

One form of dementia – Alzheimer's disease – has received increasing attention in the years since a German psychiatrist Alois Alzheimer first described it in 1907. Because Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, it is usually used as the prototype for this disorder.

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive disorder that slowly kills nerve cells in the brain. An estimated 4 million Americans are afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. One study revealed that 47 percent of those over age 85 have Alzheimer's disease. The odds of developing Alzheimer's disease increase fourfold among family members of a person suffering from the disorder.

The onset of Alzheimer's disease is usually very slow and gradual. Since Alzheimer's disease causes the brain cells to die, the first symptom is often loss of recent and short term memory – a person may forget to turn off the stove or can't remember which medications he or she took that morning. Mild personality changes, such as apathy or social withdrawal may also occur.

As the disease progresses, the individual may not be able to follow a logical train of thought, or be unable to perform tasks that require many steps such as cooking a meal. Their reasoning ability is impaired and they may be unable to solve common everyday problems. Trouble driving, organizing objects around the home, or finding his or her way around familiar

places are also symptoms of the disease. Individuals with Alzheimer's disease may have difficulty expressing themselves and may not be able to "find the words" to express what they want. They also have an impaired capacity to follow conversations. In the final stages of the disease, the individual may stop conversing, their moods may become more erratic, they become depressed, uncooperative, incontinent and, in the end, become unable to care for themselves.

Scientists have not yet defined the cause(s) of Alzheimer's disease and until the cause(s) are known, a cure becomes elusive. The symptoms of the disease, however, can be moderated. New medications such as Aricept, for example, have proven to be effective in slowing the progression of the disorder. In addition, a vaccine has recently been discovered which will be used to prevent, or even stop the progress of the illness.

An accurate and comprehensive assessment for Alzheimer's disease, or other dementias is the most important step to take in order to properly treat these disorders. Despite its prevalence, Alzheimer's disease and other dementias are often unrecognized or misdiagnosed in their early stages. Failure to identify these disorders at an early stage can result in inappropriate treatment, hazardous situations, and needless distress. Early recognition and treatment can, however, slow the progression of the disease, prevent problems, and allow the patient and family to plan for the future.

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