

## ABOUT ALZHEIMER'S

### An Overview of Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias

(Pronounced ALZ-HY-MERZ)

#### What is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's is a disease of the brain that causes a steady decline in memory. This results in dementia loss of intellectual functions (thinking, remembering, and reasoning) severe enough to interfere with everyday life.

When German physician Alois Alzheimer first described the disease in 1907, it was considered rare. Today, Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia, affecting 10 percent of people 65 years old, and nearly 50 percent of those age 85 or older. An estimated 4 million Americans have Alzheimer's.

Alzheimer's disease usually begins gradually, causing a person to forget recent events and to have difficulty performing familiar tasks. How rapidly the disease advances varies from person to person, causing confusion, personality and behavior changes, and impaired judgment.

Communication becomes difficult as the person with Alzheimer's struggles to find words, finish thoughts, or follow directions. Eventually, persons with Alzheimer's become totally unable to care for themselves.

## **What Causes Alzheimer's disease?**

Scientists are still not certain what causes the disease. Age and family history with Alzheimer's disease are identifiable risk factors for the disease. Scientists are exploring the role of genetics in the development of Alzheimer's, focusing on chromosome 19 (Rarer forms of the disease, which strike people in their 30's and 40's, often run within families and appear to be related to chromosome 1, chromosome 14, and chromosome 21). Many researchers and physicians are coming to believe that Alzheimer's is a complex disease, probably caused by a variety of influences.

## **Does Alzheimer's disease run in families?**

The evidence is not clear. Cases where several members of a single family have had autopsy-confirmed diagnoses of Alzheimer's disease are rare. Much more common is the situation where a single family member is diagnosed as having probable Alzheimer's (meaning that physicians 80 to 90 percent certain that it is Alzheimer's).

A person's risk of developing the disease seems to be slightly higher if a first-degree relative (brother, sister, parent) has the disease. This situation is called "familial," which means there could be a genetic factor involved, or perhaps family members were exposed to something in the environment that caused the disease.

### **Does Alzheimer's disease occur in younger adults?**

Yes. The disease can occur in people in their 30s, 40s and 50s, however, most people diagnosed with Alzheimer's are older than 65. This is called "early-onset" and represents less than 10 percent of Alzheimer cases. When a younger adult has Alzheimer's disease, the issues related to care, financial planning, work, family, children, etc., can be very different than with older adults with the disease.

### **Isn't memory loss a natural part of aging?**

Yes and no. Everyone has forgotten where they parked the car or the name of an acquaintance at one time or another. And many healthy individuals are less able to remember certain kinds of information as they get older.

The symptoms of Alzheimer's disease are much more severe than such simple memory lapses. Alzheimer symptoms affect communication, learning, thinking, reasoning, and can have an impact on a person's work and social life.

The chart below provides examples of the differences between persons with Alzheimer's disease and age-related memory problems.

What is the difference between Alzheimer's disease and normal age-related memory difficulties?

Activity	A Person with Alzheimer's Disease	A Person with Age-Associated Memory Problems
Forgets	whole experiences	parts of experiences
Remembers later	rarely	often
Can follow written or spoken directions	gradually unable	usually able
Can use notes	gradually unable	usually able
Can care for self	gradually unable	usually able

*Note: Determination of whether memory loss is associated with Alzheimer's disease can only be made by health care professionals.*

*\* Derived from the book *Care of Alzheimer's Patients: A Manual for Nursing Home Staff* by Lisa P. Gwyther, A.C.S.W.*