

# WHAT IS ALZHEIMER'S?



EDUCATION  
SERIES



Alzheimer's disease is an irreversible, progressive brain disorder that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills and, eventually, the ability to carry out the simplest tasks. In most people with the disease – those with the late-onset type – symptoms first appear in their mid-60s. Early-onset Alzheimer's occurs between a person's 30s and mid-60s and is very rare. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia among older adults, accounting for 60 to 80 percent of all cases in the United States.

Dementia is an umbrella term for a range of conditions that involve a loss of cognitive functioning.

Alzheimer's involves plaques and tangles forming in the brain. Symptoms start gradually and are most likely to include a decline in cognitive function and language ability.

The disease is named after Dr. Alois Alzheimer. In 1906, Dr. Alzheimer noticed changes in the brain tissue of a woman who had died of an unusual mental illness. Her symptoms included memory loss, language problems, and unpredictable behavior. After she died, he examined her brain and found many abnormal clumps (now called amyloid plaques) and tangled bundles of fibers (now called neurofibrillary, or tau, tangles).

## ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE TYPICALLY HAS SEVEN STAGES:

### 1. NORMAL OUTWARD BEHAVIOR

Symptoms in this stage are nearly undetectable. Only a positron emission tomography (PET) scan administered by a doctor would reveal the person has Alzheimer's.

### 2. VERY MILD CHANGES

Symptoms might still be hard to notice in this stage too. Subtle changes like forgetting something minor or misplacing an item usually don't interfere with the person living independently.

### 3. MILD DECLINE

Most loved ones will start to notice symptoms in this stage, like forgetfulness or asking the same question over and over.

### 4. MODERATE DECLINE

The symptoms that begin to occur in stage 3 become more pronounced and obvious in stage 4. Individuals might forget what month it is, who the president is, or even their own name.

### 5. MODERATE SEVERE DECLINE

Forgetfulness and organization continues to decline in this stage. They still have long-term memory and can remember some past stories.

### 6. SEVERE DECLINE

Common symptoms include forgetting names, difficulty talking, and mild delusions.

### 7. VERY SEVERE DECLINE

In addition to memory loss and cognitive decline, basic abilities like eating and walking can become difficult.

The cause of Alzheimer's varies, and there are both unavoidable and modifiable risk factors. Unavoidable risk factors include aging, family history, and carrying certain genes. Modifiable factors that may help prevent Alzheimer's include regular exercise, a healthy diet, and keeping your brain active through cognitive activities.

There is no known cure for Alzheimer's. The death of brain cells can't be reversed. There are several treatments including drug therapy and regular, structured activities. Because of complexities of this disease as it progresses and inability to live independently, those living with Alzheimer's often need a community that specializes in memory care.

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