



newsletter

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This newsletter is for your general information and is not a substitute for medical advice. You should contact your doctor with any questions about your health, treatment or care.

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease is a condition that causes healthy brain tissue to degenerate, resulting in memory loss and declining mental and functional abilities severe enough to interfere with daily living (debilitating). Alzheimer's disease is not a normal part of ageing, but the risk of developing this condition increases with age. Alzheimer's disease usually affects people older than 65, and even more so over the age of 85. Scientists believe that it takes a combination of genetic, lifestyle and environmental factors to trigger the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

Symptoms of Alzheimer's disease

Alzheimer's disease may start with slight memory loss and confusion, but it eventually leads to irreversible mental impairment that diminishes the person's ability to remember, reason, learn and imagine.

Alzheimer's disease is characterised by:

- continual memory loss
- repeating things, forgetting conversations, missing appointments, routinely misplacing things (often putting them in illogical locations)
- difficulty in finding the right words to express thoughts or even follow conversations
- reduced ability to read and write
- losing sense of time and dates
- getting lost in familiar surroundings
- increasing difficulty in solving everyday problems, such as knowing what to do if food on the stove is burning
- greater difficulty in doing things that require planning, decision-making and judgment
- depression, which is quite commonly associated with this condition.

Tips for improving memory

Eat healthily

This is the most important thing you can do for your brain and memory. Following a healthy diet will help you to maintain a healthy weight. Excess fat cells, however, slow down the blood circulation to the brain causing cells to die, which results in memory loss. Purple foods such as blueberries, acai berries and grapes are high in antioxidants that help to eliminate toxins and strengthen the brain. Green vegetables and foods that are high in essential fatty acids such as avocados, coconuts, flax seeds and other nuts and seeds are also helpful.



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Engage in mental exercises

Try crossword puzzles or number puzzles such as sudoku. Learning a new language or playing a musical instrument are also great stimulants and strengthen the mind.

Exercise regularly

Physical exercise such as taking short walks on a daily basis helps to improve memory.

Reduce stress

Stress contributes to memory loss by diminishing your ability to remember things. Manage stress through doing yoga or meditation, practicing aromatherapy, taking hot baths and getting sufficient sleep. This helps the brain to relax and function better.

Practice ridiculous association

This entails creating vivid mental images of the information you need to remember. When something stands out, it's usually not easily forgotten. So the mental images you form must be the same way; the more silly/outrageous they are, the easier it will be to remember.

Work on your concentration skills

Do your best to remember things and keep all distractions at bay (e.g. if the phone rings, allow it to go through to answering machine). Avoid multitasking, at least in the beginning, as your mind will be focused on too many things.

Testing and diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease

The doctor will take a thorough history and a complete examination. The doctor will also ask the patient to answer specific questions as part of the diagnosis. Since the patient may be forgetful, it will be particularly useful if patients are accompanied by a close family member who will be able to offer valuable insight about the patient's daily functioning.

To help distinguish Alzheimer's disease from other causes of memory loss, the doctor may require certain tests to be done. Blood tests may be helpful to rule out other potential causes of the dementia (memory loss), such as thyroid disorders or vitamin deficiencies. A brain scan may also be requested to pinpoint any visible abnormalities such as clots, bleeding or tumours that may be causing signs and symptoms.

Treatment of Alzheimer's disease

Although there is no known cure for Alzheimer's disease, treatment may improve the patient's quality of life. Doctors may prescribe medication to improve the symptoms that often accompany Alzheimer's disease, including sleeplessness (insomnia), wandering, anxiety, agitation and depression.

Medication such as cholinesterase inhibitors e.g. donepezil (Aricept®) and rivastigmine (Exelon®) have been proven to slow the intellectual decline associated with Alzheimer's disease i.e. they improve the levels of certain chemicals in the brain. However, they are not effective for everyone, and the side effects may include diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting. Symptoms may settle after a while but may recur if the patient is taking the medication inconsistently.

Alzheimer patients and their carers need support and affection from friends and family. It is important that carers, friends or family members understand the condition in order to lend their support. It is advisable to deal with all financial and estate matters as soon as possible i.e. before the condition severely affects the person's decision-making ability. The doctor may provide details for nearby support groups, nursing institutions and other care facilities.

Consult the BP Medical Aid Society Member Guide for benefit information on nursing, homecare, rehabilitation centres and other related services.

Sources

Hello Doctor
Mayo Clinic
UpToDate

