

Frequently Asked Questions About Alzheimer's Disease

A guide for your patients and their caregivers

Could my memory loss just be a sign of aging?

In some instances, yes. Misplacing your eyeglasses or forgetting a phone number occasionally can be normal. However, if your forgetfulness interferes with your ability to work or perform daily activities and maybe other people are taking notice, you may have the warning signs of AD.

What is AD?

Alzheimer's disease is a brain disease that affects a person's ability to remember, reason, and communicate. More than 4.5 million Americans have AD. It is a progressive disease and the most common form of dementia that usually develops in people 65 years or older.

What causes AD?

To date, the causes are unknown, however, it is believed that microscopic structures called plaques and tangles form in the brains of people with AD. At the same time, brain cells begin to die. Although these changes occur throughout the brain, they happen mainly in those parts of the brain that are needed for memory, language, and reasoning. Other areas of the brain generally aren't affected until late in the illness.

Although the cause is not clear, researchers have identified certain risk factors for AD including age, family history, genetics, a previous head injury, combination hormone replacement therapy in women, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and poor nutrition.

What are the symptoms?

The brain cell damage of AD often occurs long before any symptoms appear. The first thing most people experience is a loss of memory that interferes with their lives. People with AD also have trouble communicating, learning, thinking, and reasoning. As the disease progresses, personality changes may also be seen.

Is there a cure?

There is no cure for AD, however, there are treatments that can help slow the progression of symptoms. Medical science is learning more about AD all the time, and new treatments are on the horizon.

How long does it take AD to progress?

AD advances at a different rate for every person. The period of illness can run on average from 3 to 20 years, but there are 3 distinct phases (mild, moderate and severe) with hallmark symptoms that allow caregivers to identify changes in behavior and monitor the progression of the disease with the doctor.

Can treatment stop the progression of memory loss and other symptoms?

No. The AD treatments available now can only slow down or stabilize memory loss for a period of time. Eventually, the disease will progress.