

Alzheimer's Awareness



What Causes Alzheimer's?

We've learned a lot about this disease recently, but there are still questions.

Let's break down what we know, and what we don't know, about an issue that impacts some 6.5 million Americans, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

WHAT WE KNOW

Risk factor: Age remains the biggest risk factor when discussing Alzheimer's. Symptoms appear for most after the age of 65. Brain-imaging technology has helped in identifying buildups of special kinds of proteins related to the disease, making it easier to diagnose before obvious symptoms begin to emerge.

Lifestyle choices: Eating healthy foods, exercising and getting the proper amount of sleep, and remaining social and upbeat are preventative measures you can take, researchers say. One study cited by the AARP showed that lifestyle changes may reduce your risk by as much as 35%.

Racial Disparity: African Americans are twice as likely as Caucasians to develop Alzheimer's. Hispanics are 1.5 times more likely than whites. Other socioeconomic factors like income, education level and even where you live seem to play a role, too.

Linked genes: APOE, which has several forms, has been linked to increased risk of Alzheimer's — specifically a



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APOE e4 protein. Your risk increases if you have a copy of this protein from both parents. On the other hand, APOE e2 actually reduces your risk of getting Alzheimer's.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Specific triggers: Scientists still don't know what causes abnormal proteins to begin

depositing in our brains, or how they damage our neurons. A small percentage of patients have a build-up of plaque, but are never diagnosed with Alzheimer's — and that also remains a mystery.

How the genes work: Scientists know that this disease is most likely the result of interactions between dozens of genes. But we haven't

successfully mapped out how these complex processes lead to Alzheimer's.

Medicines that will help: There are available drugs that may offer limited relief with Alzheimer's symptoms, but none have been shown to cure or even slow down the disease. Some pharmaceutical companies have decided to halt development projects for

Alzheimer's drugs. That's because the failure rate for these drugs has been 99%, according to the AARP.

What else matters: Researchers are also still studying whether certain social factors may have a causal link, or if others may help people build up individual resilience against Alzheimer's.

Know the Warning Signs

It's difficult to detect because symptoms mimic signs of aging.

Older people can forget details, have trouble with technical things or begin to move more slowly. Here's how to determine if it's something more serious.

MEMORY

Early diagnosis helps immensely with getting more successful treatment and disease management. So watch for memory loss that tends to disrupt our daily routines, in particular when it comes to information that was learned more recently. Watch for signs of forgetfulness with important life events, suddenly requiring memory aids, or asking for the same details repeatedly. Alzheimer's is also associated with difficulties in concentration or problem solving with routine activities like recipes or balancing a checkbook. Confusion with place and time should be monitored, including regularly forgetting where they were going or how they arrived there. Dementia patients may also have difficulty in comprehending anything that isn't currently happening.

SENSES

Watch closely if regular tasks begin to take longer than they used to. Emerging Alzheimer's sufferers may have difficulty comprehending visual images or some spa-



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tial relationships, because of vision problems. Difficulty in reading, distinguishing between colors and judging distances is also part of the range of symptoms. This can be a particular issue for those who are still driving. They may abruptly begin talking in the middle of someone else's conversation, or have difficulty speaking. Problems with remembering the names of common items, or the right

words for what they're thinking have been noted, as well as difficulties with handwriting.

COGNITIVE

More commonly misplacing items is a concerning development, as well as an inability to retrace their steps when searching for it. In some cases, Alzheimer's sufferers begin accusing those around them of stealing the misplaced

item. Look for moments of poor judgment, such as giving large amounts of cash to scammers, telemarketers or internet merchants. They may also begin paying less attention to house cleaning or personal hygiene.

Early onset is sometimes accompanied by a withdrawal from hobbies, social activities, and favorite shows or teams. Often, this happens because they are suddenly finding it

hard to follow along or to remember how to participate. Self-imposed isolation may happen because of those changes. Watch for drastic changes in personality or mood, including confusion, depression, anxiety, suspicion, fear or paranoia. They may become easily upset with family, friends and coworkers — or when they find themselves out of their comfort zone.

Evaluating a Memory Care Center

These specially designed facilities provide needed care for those with dementia.

Here's what to look for and expect when making critical choices for those suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

WHEN YOU VISIT

There are a number of questions which are essential when evaluating a memory care facility, according to the Alzheimer's Association: How often are doctors, nurses and nurse practitioners on the premises of the prospective facility? There should be a registered nurse available at all times. What are their training protocols, and are they specific to dementia? The facility should be in compliance with all state requirements. What is the ratio of staff members to residents? Are families allowed to actively participate in the planning of care, and are they encouraged to regularly communicate with staff members?

Therapies including physical, speech, occupational and recreational should be offered. Do they keep track of how often patients fall, and how does management work to address this concerning issue? Staff members should closely monitor nutrition; ask to see menus and inquire about special dietary needs and requests. As a patient's needs change, how is that addressed



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through continuing care? Do they have a long-range plan for residents, so that they may "age in place" with the proper care and dignity?

SERVICES

An everyday retirement home won't do. Ensure that the staff at any prospective memory care center are specially trained to work with patients suffering from

dementia, since their needs are so specific. Look for facilities which offer memory-enhancing activities and therapies. Services offered should include medicinal management, mobility assistance, incontinence care, housekeeping, transportation, laundry and healthy meals.

SAFETY

Caregivers want to improve

the quality of life for Alzheimer's sufferers, but safety is the first priority. The best memory care facilities are carefully designed to reduce confusion, with architectural and planning concepts meant to address common issues like wandering. There should be clear lines of sight, and secure exits. Areas or wings of the facility may be themed, so that patients can

associate certain colors or imagery with activities, rooms or hallways. Other design elements are sometimes put in place simply to stimulate their patients' senses. Sensors throughout the community may also track residents in order to keep them safe. Look for a low staff-to-patient ratio, so that they can pay the most personal attention to a resident's needs and well being.

Getting Checked is Important

Early detection can give you a leg up on important therapies.

See a doctor to establish whether your symptoms are a sign that treatment should begin — or nothing to worry about.

PEACE OF MIND

Getting checked out will provide you with a firm diagnosis from your doctor on whether or not the signs you've noticed are linked to Alzheimer's. Some of the most common changes people experience may simply be the result of aging. If they're not, you can collaborate on a treatment program to address these symptoms, and begin making long-term plans to manage the disease.

TREATMENT

If Alzheimer's is, in fact, diagnosed, then you'll immediately have access to a range of treatments, including medication. There is no cure for Alzheimer's, but these therapies may lessen your symptoms to make the disease more manageable. The earlier you're diagnosed, the more effective these medications may be.

RESEARCH

Your experience with the disease could help find a cure. Every patient's journey becomes part of the larger community of knowledge about how Alzheimer's devel-



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ops, how it impacts patients and how it reacts to new therapies and medical approaches. The outcomes of those participating in a clinical trials can also lead to breakthroughs in research and, perhaps, an answer to all of our questions about this disease.

YOUR HEALTH

Being diagnosed brings its own worries, but it also allows

patients and their families to begin making plans and important changes. Take this opportunity to focus on your health. Cognitive functions can be preserved longer by controlling your blood pressure, exercising, eating and living well, remaining social and improving your mental health. Prioritize spending more time together, and take advantage of those little

moments that mean so much but which are also so often overlooked.

PLANNING

Your diagnosis confirms that certain health issues are ahead. Make plans now to address those changes through every stage of this disease. This will ensure that your wishes are met as time goes by, in particular as cogni-

tive functions may diminish. These conversations can be difficult, but discuss financial, legal and end-of-life decisions early into this journey. Review documents, confirm will and succession plans, and work out any financial concerns. Once these important issues are resolved, you'll be able to more easily focus on spending quality time and attending to your health.

Taking Part in a Clinical Trial

Your involvement could lead to a groundbreaking new Alzheimer's discovery.

Researchers continue to test new drugs, therapies and clinical treatments, but they may need your help.

WHY THEY'RE IMPORTANT

Clinical trials help researchers determine if the experimental treatments they've devised have some sort of real-world impact. These drugs and therapies must be deemed safe and effective before they are approved for use by patients. The Food and Drug Administration actually requires three different phases of trials before a drug is released for sale and marketing: pre-clinical trials, then clinical trials, and finally an extensive review of a new drug's application. Trials compare new treatments to the best versions now available to see if it has an improved performance. They may also compare these new treatments with a placebo, meaning a treatment that has no medicinal effect. Answers to these questions may determine that a new treatment represents a groundbreaking advance.

DIFFERENT TRIALS

Trials look at two important elements of Alzheimer's care: Symptom reduction and



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efforts to stop or slow this disease. Those focusing on reducing symptoms may try changing the dosage or scheduling of medication to see if that has an impact. Trials of treatments meant to end Alzheimer's will experiment with new drugs that address how the disease starts or progresses. In both cases, researchers may attempt to combine medications to see if

they work better together.

WHAT THEY STUDY

Researchers are looking into preventatives like medication, but also vitamins and changes in lifestyles. They work with those at a higher risk of an Alzheimer's diagnosis, studying the impacts of these therapies as well as their quality of life so that their support, education and emotional needs

may be better addressed. Others are searching for better ways to confirm a diagnosis. The hope is to discover methods that are more reliable and easier to apply by doctors.

GETTING INVOLVED

If you're interested in moving forward, discuss clinical trials with your doctor, who'll help determine if you qualify. Mental health counselors and

members of any support group you're involved with may also be able to recommend resources or individuals who can help along the way. Others with friends or family who have Alzheimer's might have more information about how these trials work and how to get involved, as may others who have been informed that they are at a higher risk for the disease.

Spotting Early Onset Alzheimer's

Our risk increases with age, but younger people can also test positive.

Studies show that some 200,000 Americans who are under age 65 are living with Alzheimer's disease, about 5% of those diagnosed.

SCREENING

Alzheimer's is particularly difficult to diagnose initially because doctors aren't necessarily looking for signs of the disease when evaluating those in their 40s and 50s.

Symptoms may be attributed to everyday stress, or things like to mental illness. Everyone experiences the disease differently, as the Alzheimer's Association reminds, and in some cases that translates into an early onset. Those experiencing noticeable problems with memory should schedule a comprehensive evaluation, preferably with a doctor who specializes in dementia.

Document memory issues or any other cognitive difficulties you may experience so that a detailed discussion can be had with your health care provider. Sharing as much information as possible ensures the most complete evaluation possible, since no single test currently confirms an Alzheimer's diagnosis.

CAUSES

Unfortunately, science hasn't yet determined the cause of Alzheimer's itself — or most



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early-onset cases. They suspect nerve damage is done by two proteins.

Most early-onset sufferers have the common form of Alzheimer's, and it progresses in roughly the same manner as with older people — just on an earlier timeline.

Scientists better understand the causes of so-called familial Alzheimer's — but it is far

more rare.

With those cases, a group of genes has been identified that leads to Alzheimer's, impacting a few hundred or so families around the world. Those who inherit these genes can develop symptoms earlier, sometimes even in their 30s. Most cases of early-onset Alzheimer's, however, are not familial.

CARRYING ON

While there is no cure, lifestyle habits can have an impact on living with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Make any legal and financial decisions as soon as possible, while putting your health care wishes, will and other directives in writing. Sufferers may still have careers to attend to, and sometimes families with

children. That makes living with the disease a challenge. Check with your employer and insurance provider to find out more about disability, family and medical leave and early retirement options. The Alzheimer's Association recommends sufferers have frank talks with children so they have a firm grasp on what the future holds.

Dispelling Persistent Myths

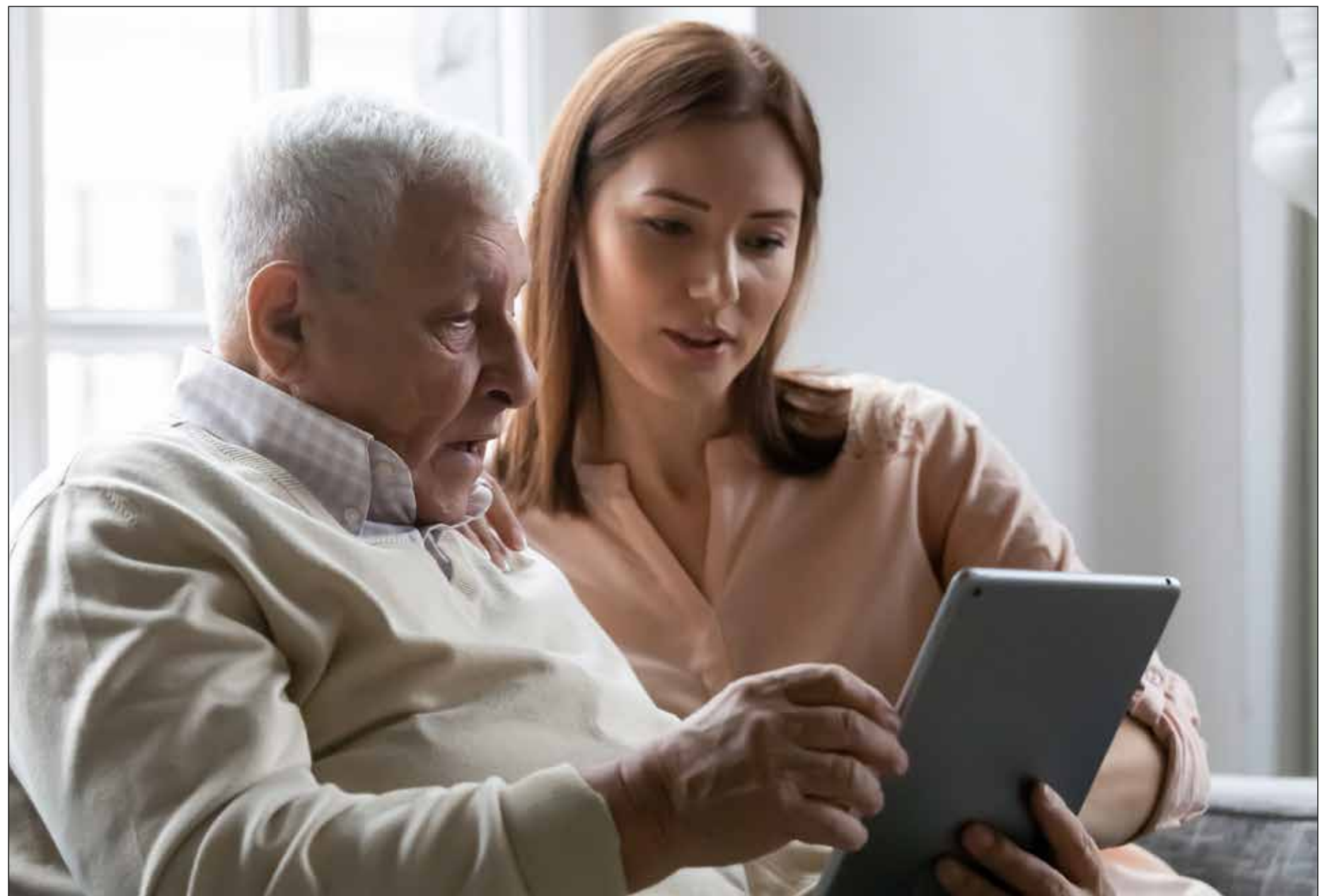
Although Alzheimer's is a well-known disease, many misconceptions remain.

It's important to protect yourself and your loved ones from bad information about its causes, treatments and outcomes.

Alzheimer's remains a riddle, even to scientists. They have pinpointed two proteins in trying to determine the cause of this disease. Fragments of one of them build up over time into so-called plaques, while twisted fibers of another create what's known as tangles in the brain. Nearly everyone develops both as they age, but those with Alzheimer's disease unfortunately develop many more of them. No one knows why. These proteins damage memory first, and then begin impacting other areas of the brain — and that's another mystery. With so much still unknown, a series of myths have developed around the disease. Here's the truth about some of most common of them, courtesy of the Alzheimer's Association.

ALUMINUM CANS

Researchers actually looked into whether exposure to aluminum was linked with Alzheimer's decades ago, and conclusively decided that it did not. The worry back then was that we are often sur-



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rounded by this metal, in the form of soda cans, pots and pans. Scientists have since moved on to studies of other possible causes of the disease.

ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS

The artificial sweetener aspartame has been rumored to cause memory loss, despite appearing in countless products while being sold as the key ingredient in stand-alone items like Equal and

Nutrasweet. The Food and Drug Administration approved the use of aspartame in the mid-'90s, and no evidence has been confirmed in the decades that followed linking it to loss of memory or any other symptom of Alzheimer's.

MIRACLE CURES

The FDA has approved drugs that will temporarily slow Alzheimer's symptoms,

but they only last for a period of months — and only for about half of those who try them. As Alzheimer's continues to attack brain cells, unfortunately, it becomes fatal. There are currently no treatments that halt the progression of this disease, though scientists continue working toward that goal.

SILVER FILLINGS

Concerns about dental fill-

ing rose as patients learned that they weren't composed solely of silver. Instead, they're mostly made of mercury, a heavy metal which can be toxic.

But public health institutions including the FDA and the World Health Organization have found no relationship between these amalgam fillings and dementia. Other forms of fillings have also been introduced.