

Alzheimer's Disease Key Talking Points

Dementia vs. Normal Aging:

Dementia is an umbrella term used to describe over 100 different conditions that impair memory, behavior and thinking. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. While people who are aging normally may forget things as well, they will typically remember them later.

Early Warning Signs Include:

- Memory loss especially when it comes to recent or important events, names, placement of objects, and other new information. *Versus "normal aging": Periodically and temporarily forgetting names, appointments, or where you left your keys.*
- Disorientation to time and place. Become lost on your own street or forget where you are, how you got there and how to return home. *Versus "normal aging": Forgetting the day of the week or why you entered a room.*
- Struggle to complete familiar actions, such as brushing teeth, getting dressed, preparing a meal, or placing a telephone call. *Versus "normal aging": Sometimes needing assistance with an electronic device.*
- Trouble finding the appropriate words, completing sentences, and following directions and conversations. May repeat and call things by the wrong name. *Versus "normal aging": Occasionally struggling to find the right word.*
- Poor judgment when making decisions, for example, wear several shirts on a warm day or give away large sums of money to solicitors. *Versus "normal aging": Making questionable or debatable decisions at times.*
- Changes in mood and personality, such as increased suspicion, rapid and persistent mood swings, withdrawal, and disinterest in usual activities. *Versus "normal aging": Feeling fatigued by work and social obligations now and then or becoming irritable when a routine is disrupted.*
- Difficulty with complex mental assignments, such as balancing a checkbook or other tasks involving numbers or following directions. *Versus "normal aging": Making a mistake when balancing a checkbook or leaving an ingredient out of a recipe every now and then.*

What Causes Alzheimer's?

Scientists don't yet fully understand what causes Alzheimer's disease. The causes probably include a combination of genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors that lead to a complex series of brain changes that occur over decades. The importance of any one of these factors in increasing or decreasing the risk of developing Alzheimer's may differ from person to person.

Most people with Alzheimer's disease have the late-onset form of the disease in which their symptoms become apparent at age 65 and later. Researchers have not found a specific gene that directly causes late-onset Alzheimer's however, some genes have been identified as increasing the risk of developing the disease.

Young-onset Alzheimer's disease is an uncommon form of the disease that affects people younger than age 65. For most people with young-onset Alzheimer's, the cause is not related to any single gene. Researchers don't fully know why some people get the disease at a younger age than others do. Risk factors for young-onset Alzheimer's disease include a family history of the condition. But family history of the disease doesn't mean you will necessarily develop the disease.

Less commonly, young-onset Alzheimer's is caused by a specific error in a gene, called a genetic mutation. Genetic mutations can be passed from parent to child. Among all people with Alzheimer's disease, fewer than 1% carry one of these causal genes.

Living with Alzheimer's disease

If you or a loved one has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, you may be feeling overwhelmed. You and your family will need time for the diagnosis to sink in and to prepare emotionally, financially, and practically for this progressive and terminal disease. This is a difficult time, but it's helpful to know about the condition once a formal diagnosis has been made. Many people with Alzheimer's feel a sense of relief when the news or understanding of their condition is finally out in the open.

You and your family may be better able to prepare yourselves and live much more fully after accepting the terminal nature of the disease. There will be time ahead to continue enjoying life and pleasurable activities, even if it's in a different way, and to make important plans and decisions with loved ones.

Gathering more information can help relieve your anxiety and stress. Learning, knowing what to expect, and sharing thoughts and information with loved ones, others who have the disease and professionals can help you feel more in control and better able to take advantage of current treatments and assistance.

Care for the Caregiver

If you are a caregiver, there are some very important reasons to develop a daily self-care plan. It is very easy to lose sight of your own physical and emotional needs when you are caring for someone with Alzheimer's. Ignoring your own needs and health can lead to emotional burnout and even serious physical problems. Don't let this happen to you. There will still be times when you are discouraged and exhausted, but if you commit yourself to good self-care, you will be able to take better care of your loved one and avoid more serious symptoms for yourself.

Here are a few important steps to good self-care to keep your own physical and emotional batteries charged.

First, accept that taking care of yourself is an essential part of taking care of your loved one. Good self-care is essential and you do not need to feel guilty about taking the time for your own needs.

It is important that you take time for your own medical appointments. Do not put your physical and emotional needs on the shelf. If you need to see your doctor about physical or emotional symptoms, make sure to do so as soon as possible to avoid problems becoming bigger.

Take time every day for some exercise, including stretching your muscles to relieve tension. Exercise is the best medicine for stress relief and helps avoid muscle aches and other stress symptoms.

Do not be embarrassed about asking for guidance on how to cope with the demands of caregiving and difficult behaviors that your loved one displays. This is not a job that only one person can do, so do not expect to have all the answers. Allow people with experience and knowledge to support you with new ideas on how to care for your loved one.

Ask for help. Asking family, friends, members of your faith community, etc., to stay with your loved one while you do errands, see a movie, or have lunch with a friend can go a long way to recharging your batteries. It will make others feel good to know they are helping and can be essential to your mental health. If no one is available, consider hiring help for a few hours a week, to ensure you have a break.

Educate yourself about all the resources available to you and your loved one in the community. There are great resources out there such as support groups, caregiver education, adult day care, overnight respite, financial aid, in-home care, and other resources that can help you on your journey as a caregiver.

Call Alzheimer's New Jersey® today at 888-280-6055 to find out more information about the disease and resources available in your community.