

# Alzheimer's Disease: Risk factors, diagnosis & disease progression

## Risk Factors

The exact cause of Alzheimer's disease is unknown. There are however, 5 known risk factors recognised in the development of Alzheimer's disease (AD). These known risk factors are as followed:

- **Age:** The older the person is, the greater the risk of developing the disease. Approximately 1 in 20 people over the age of 65 years. The likelihood of developing Alzheimer's doubles about every five years after age 65. After age 85, the risk reaches nearly 50 percent.
- **Gender:** Alzheimer's disease appears to affect more women than men.
- **Family History:** The risk of developing the disease is greater if a primary relative (parent, grand parent or sibling) develop AD prior to the age of 65 years.
- **Head Injury:** A severe head injury or repeated blows to the head may increase the risk of developing dementia but not necessarily Alzheimer's disease.
- **Down Syndrome:** For unknown reasons, people with Down Syndrome are prone to developing Alzheimer's disease in their thirties or forties.

## How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis of AD is a complicated process and there is no definitive test for the disease. Accurate diagnosis can only be made with an autopsy.

The first step is to see your doctor for a thorough medical examination. The doctors will diagnose AD by a process of elimination. There are a number of other conditions and illnesses that mimic the symptoms of AD, many of which are treatable.

### Alzheimer's Queensland

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Some of these illnesses can include depression, liver or kidney disease, some infections, vitamin deficiencies and the use of particular medication. Numerous tests may be required to rule out these and other causes.

Once diagnosis is made, it is advisable to contact Alzheimer's Queensland for information and to assist in the implementation of appropriate management plans.

## Progression of Alzheimer's disease

Alzheimer's disease occurs when there is a destruction of brain cells in small isolated areas of the brain. The appearance of the diseased cells is referred to as 'plaques' and 'tangles.'

Each area of the brain controls different functions, so depending on where the disease first strikes, will determine the initial symptoms seen. Most commonly the first area of the brain affected is the memory centre. This is why short-term memory loss is often the first sign experienced by people with Alzheimer's disease.

Over the time, the disease spreads to affect other functions such as the ability to use and understand language; or to perform familiar tasks such as dressing. At the end stage of the disease it is not uncommon for the person to no longer be able to recognise close family members (e.g. spouse or children). The person with AD becomes dependent on a carer to

assist with basic daily activities such as eating and personal hygiene.

As the disease causes progressive deterioration of the brain, the world becomes an increasingly confusing and frightening place for the person with Alzheimer's disease. It is no wonder that these people often exhibit anger and aggression. They may realise that something amiss, but not know what is wrong or what to do about it.

Living with AD is characterised by loss and that is a tragedy, for both the person with the disease, their carer and their family (refer to the fact sheet *Grief, Loss and Guilt* for more information).

## Frequently asked questions

### Is there a cure for Alzheimer's disease?

At present, there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease. There are neither drugs nor therapies to halt the progression or reverse damage that has already occurred. There are some drugs that can be trialled to help slow the progression and help manage the person's behavioural changes that are associated with the disease.

### **How long does a person with Alzheimer's disease live?**

This is impossible to predict. The symptoms, severity and rate of progression of the disease varies from person to person. On average a person with Alzheimer's disease will live up to 10 years from when symptoms first occur. However, people can live up to 20 years or more.

### **Do all 'old' people get Alzheimer's disease?**

The answer is a definite NO. Alzheimer's disease is not a normal part of aging. The majority of people will never get Alzheimer's disease. About 1 in 20 people over the age of 65 may be affected, and the incidence increases to about 25- 30% of people over the age of 80.

**For any questions or concerns you have in relation to dementia and its management, or for specific information on services available in your area and how to access them, please contact Alzheimer's Queensland on 1800 639 331**

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