

## Preparing for the Assessment

On the day of the appointment, it will be useful to have the following information on hand. Writing this information down beforehand can be helpful.

### *Things you will be asked*

- What symptoms have been noticed?
- When did they first appear?
- How have the symptoms changed over time?
- What other medical conditions exist?
- What medications are currently being taken (both prescription and over-the-counter)?
- What herbal remedies and/or dietary supplements are currently being taken?
- Is there a family history of Alzheimer Disease or psychiatric conditions?

### *Things you may want to ask*

- Which tests will be performed?
- What is involved in the tests?
- How long will the tests take?
- How long will it take to learn the results?
- How are the results communicated? Who will be involved?

## The Family's Role

Sometimes the person experiencing the problems will go to see his or her doctor. For others, the family will play a role in alerting the doctor of a problem.

### *Tips to Lend a Hand*

- Make the appointment for the person
- Help with transportation
- Share this brochure with other family members
- Offer to accompany the person to appointments and tests
- Help prepare information for the first appointment
- Appreciate that this can be an unsettling time for the person and provide emotional support
- Have patience; it can take a long period of time to arrive at a diagnosis

## If the Diagnosis is Alzheimer Disease

### *You may want to ask:*

- What does the diagnosis mean?
- What can be expected over time?
- What care will be needed and is available, now and in the future?
- What treatment is available? What are the risks and benefits?
- What resources are available in the community to help?
- Are there any experimental drug trials to participate in?
- When is the next appointment?

The Alzheimer Society is a national not-for-profit health organization dedicated to helping people affected by Alzheimer Disease. The Society has numerous resources and support programs for people with the disease and their caregivers. The Society also funds research into finding the cause and cure of the disease, and into improved methods of caregiving.

For more information, contact your local Alzheimer Society or visit our Web site at [www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca).

*Help for today. Hope for tomorrow...*



# Getting a Diagnosis:

# Finding Out If It Is Alzheimer Disease

## Alzheimer Society

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*Alzheimer Disease is a progressive, degenerative disease. Symptoms include loss of memory, judgment and reasoning; difficulty with day-to-day tasks; and changes in communication abilities, mood and behaviour. If you notice any of these symptoms, it is important to see your doctor.*

## Why Find Out?

Symptoms of Alzheimer Disease can be similar to symptoms of other conditions such as depression, thyroid or heart disease, infections, drug interactions or alcohol abuse.

Finding out the cause of the symptoms can help people:

- Understand the source of the symptoms
- Get the proper care, treatment and support
- Plan for the future

## Making the Diagnosis

There is currently no single test that can tell if a person has Alzheimer Disease. The diagnosis is made through a systematic assessment which eliminates other possible causes. Until the time when there is a conclusive test, doctors may continue to use the words “probable Alzheimer Disease”. However, you should be aware that doctors making this diagnosis are accurate 80 to 90 per cent of the time.

Making the diagnosis can take time. The diagnosis can be made in a family doctor’s office, a memory clinic or a hospital. The doctor may or may not feel that the person needs to see a number of health-care professionals to help make the diagnosis. These may include a psychologist, psychiatrist, neurologist, geriatrician, nurse, social worker or occupational therapist. They will look for problems with the person’s memory, reasoning ability, language and judgment, and how these affect day-to-day function.

**The process involves:**

### **Medical History**

Both the individual and family members or friends will be asked questions regarding the person’s symptoms now and in the past. There will be questions about past illnesses and about family medical and psychiatric history.

### **Mental Status Exam**

This part of the process tests the person’s sense of time and place as well as the ability to remember, express him/herself and do simple calculations. It may involve exercises such as recalling words and objects, drawing and spelling, and questions such as “What year is it?”

### **Physical Exam**

To help rule out other causes, a physical exam will be done. The doctor will look for heart, lung, liver, kidney or thyroid problems that may be causing the symptoms. To evaluate whether other nervous system disorders are causing the symptoms, the doctor will test muscle tone and strength, co-ordination, eye movement, speech and sensation.

### **Laboratory Tests**

A number of tests will be done. Detailed blood work will be ordered to help detect problems such as anemia, diabetes, thyroid problems or infections that might be contributing to the symptoms.

Other tests such as X-rays and EEGs (electroencephalogram) may be used to determine the source of the problem. In some centres, scans may be used. The following may be recommended, but are not always necessary for a diagnosis:

**CT** (computerized tomography) scan and **MRI** (magnetic resonance imaging) take images of the brain.

**SPECT** (single proton emission computed tomography) shows how blood is circulating to the brain.

**PET** (positive electron tomography) shows how the different areas of the brain respond during certain activities such as reading and talking.

### **Psychiatric and Psychological Evaluations**

A psychiatric evaluation may be helpful in ruling out other illnesses such as depression which can cause symptoms similar to Alzheimer Disease. Neuro-psychological testing can evaluate memory, reasoning, writing, etc.

