

Family History - People with a parent, brother or sister with Alzheimer Disease have a greater chance of developing the disease than those with no family history.

Other factors being investigated by scientists include education level, genetics, toxins in the environment, diet and exercise.

Forms of Alzheimer Disease

Sporadic Alzheimer Disease is the more common form of the disease and accounts for 90 to 95 per cent of all cases. The role of heredity in this form is unclear and is the subject of much research.

Familial Autosomal Dominant Alzheimer Disease is a less common form of the disease and accounts for 5 to 10 per cent of known cases. In certain families, this form is passed directly from one generation to another.

Living with Alzheimer Disease

People are now being diagnosed with Alzheimer Disease earlier in the disease process. Individuals with the disease are seeking information and support about the issues and concerns that affect them. The Alzheimer Society has developed a number of resources to help the person living with the disease, including the "I Have Alzheimer Disease" section on our Web site (www.alzheimer.ca). Local Societies may also have support groups specifically for the person living with the disease.

Further information

For more in-depth information on the topics covered in this brochure, please refer to the following material developed by the Alzheimer Society:

*Is It Alzheimer Disease?
10 Warning Signs*

*Getting a Diagnosis: Finding
Out If It Is Alzheimer Disease*

*Alzheimer Disease and Risk
Factors Information Sheet*

*Alzheimer Disease and
Heredity Information Sheet*

*The Progression of Alzheimer Disease
Information Sheet*

*First Steps: For Those Recently
Diagnosed With Alzheimer Disease*

*Shared Experiences: Suggestions
for those with Alzheimer Disease*

Quality of Life Information Sheet

*The Alzheimer Journey, Module 4
Understanding Alzheimer Disease:
The Link Between Brain
and Behaviour*

Copies can be obtained from your local Alzheimer Society or visit our Web site at www.alzheimer.ca.

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.

Help for today. Hope for tomorrow...

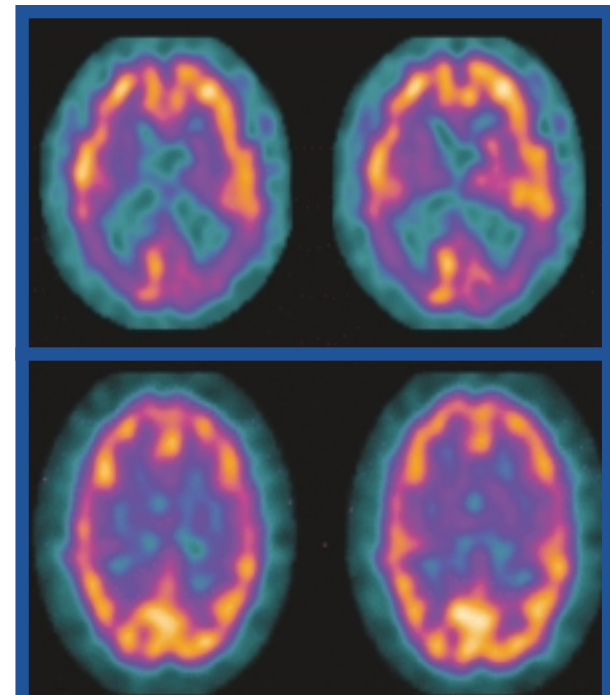
*Cover: ECD SPECT scan on the top shows a brain with Alzheimer Disease and the SPECT scan on the bottom shows a healthy brain. ECD SPECT scans were provided by Masanori Ichise, MD FRCPC (Mount Sinai Hospital Toronto / NIH Bethesda MD)
Inside panel: MRI images courtesy of Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre.*

Alzheimer Society

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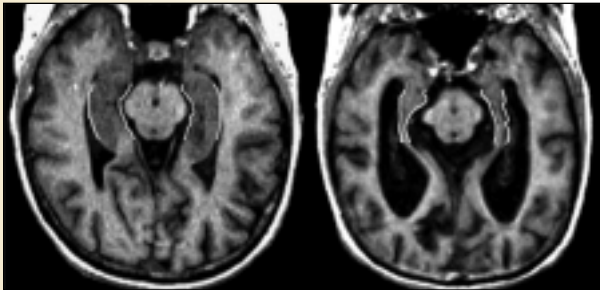
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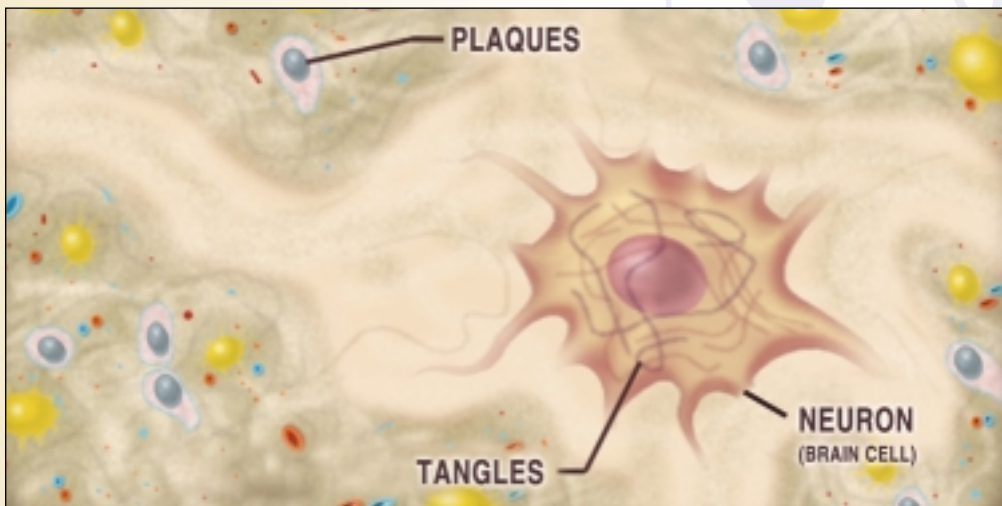
What Is Alzheimer Disease?

What we know about Alzheimer Disease

Alzheimer Disease is a progressive, degenerative disease. Several changes occur in the brain of a person with Alzheimer Disease. The brain cells shrink or disappear, and are replaced by dense, irregularly-shaped spots, or plaques. Another indicator of the disease is thread-like tangles within existing brain cells. These tangles eventually choke healthy brain cells (bottom illustration).



As the image above shows, a person with Alzheimer Disease has less brain tissue (right) than a person who does not have the disease (left). This shrinkage will continue over time, affecting how the brain functions.



As Alzheimer Disease affects each area of the brain, certain functions or abilities can be lost. This results in specific symptoms or changes in behaviour. It is important to remember that once an ability is lost it can rarely be relearned. Although the disease results in changes, it does not affect the person's ability to appreciate, respond to and experience feelings such as joy, anger, fear, love or sadness.

The effects of Alzheimer Disease

Alzheimer Disease eventually affects all aspects of a person's life: how he or she thinks, feels and acts. Individuals are affected differently. It is difficult to predict the symptoms each person will have, the order they will appear or the speed of the disease's progression. The following will be affected by the disease:

Mental abilities - A person's ability to understand, think, remember and communicate will be affected. The ability to make decisions will be reduced. Simple tasks that have been performed for years will become more difficult or be forgotten. Confusion and memory loss, initially for recent events and eventually for long-term events, will occur. The ability to find the right words and follow a conversation will be affected.

Emotions and moods - A person may appear uninterested and stop hobbies or other activities previously enjoyed. Or, he or she may quickly lose interest in an activity. The ability to control mood and emotion may be lost. Some individuals have less expression and are more withdrawn.

Behaviour - Changes in the brain will bring about changes in the way the person reacts to his or her environment. These actions may seem out of character for the person. Some common reactions include repeating the same action or words, hiding possessions, physical outbursts, restlessness or inappropriate sexual behaviour.

Physical abilities - The disease can affect a person's physical co-ordination. As the disease progresses, there will be a gradual physical decline. These changes will affect the person's ability to independently perform day-to-day tasks such as eating, bathing and getting dressed.

Treatment and strategies

There is currently no cure for Alzheimer Disease and no treatment that will stop its progression. However, several medications are available that can help with some symptoms. These medications can slow down the decline of memory, language and thinking abilities. The treatments do not work for everyone and are effective for a limited time.

It is vital for people with Alzheimer Disease to be involved in activities that emphasize their strengths and abilities. This will add meaning and greatly improve quality of life. By understanding the person's personality, life experiences, support systems and ways of coping, an approach to care can be created that preserves the individual's quality of life.

Risk factors for Alzheimer Disease

The specific cause of Alzheimer Disease is unknown. However certain risk factors have been associated with the disease. Two of these are age and family history. Risk factors do not cause a disease; they indicate possible links to the disease. Uncovering risk factors increases our understanding of Alzheimer Disease.

Age - Most people who develop Alzheimer Disease are over the age of 65. The older you become, the higher the risk for developing the disease, although it is not a normal part of aging. Some people have been diagnosed at a younger age. The term "early onset" is often used to refer to people who are diagnosed with Alzheimer Disease in their 40s or 50s.