

Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is an incurable, progressive disease that leads to the permanent loss of many brain cells. The first symptom of the disease is usually memory loss, especially concerning recent events. This isn't the normal, occasional "forgetfulness" that everyone experiences from time to time; with Alzheimer's disease, the memory loss is more persistent, and it gets progressively worse with time.

For example, during the early stages of the disease, people afflicted with Alzheimer's might get lost in familiar surroundings. While this forgetful tendency may be concealed during the early stages, it gets worse and eventually becomes impossible to hide. As the illness progresses, it may affect concentration, speech, physical coordination, visual coordination, and judgment. In the final stage of the illness, people with Alzheimer's disease are unable to communicate and can no longer recognize familiar faces or control bodily functions.

It is important to note that there are many treatable conditions that can mimic the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. For example, strokes, depression, brain tumors, malnutrition, alcoholism, drug abuse, and other illnesses can lead to memory loss and behavioral changes. The diagnosis can only be made after all other causes of the symptoms have been excluded by a complete medical evaluation. This diagnosis is usually made by the primary care practitioner. The medical evaluation typically includes a health history, physical exam, and blood tests. A CAT or MRI scan of the head is often performed. Other tests, such as psychological testing, may also be conducted.

At this time, unfortunately, there is no way to prevent or cure Alzheimer's disease. However, much research is underway, and experimental drugs are in development.

When people develop Alzheimer's disease, their family members must learn how to manage the symptoms. But equally important, family members must learn how to take care of themselves. Joining a support group of others in the same situation can be of great help. For information on support groups, call the Alzheimer's Association in your community, your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department, or your local senior citizens' center.

People with Alzheimer's disease should talk to their doctor or other medical professional about any problems they have. Medications may be prescribed to control the most troublesome symptoms, such as agitation, hallucinations, and sleeplessness. Because other conditions (such as cold and flu) can worsen the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, people suffering from the disease should take good care of themselves and see their health care professionals regularly.

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For more health information ...

- Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.

- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.