

Coping With Alzheimer's: Special Instructions for Caregivers

Early Warning Signs: When to Call the Doctor About Alzheimer's

Are you worried about an older loved one's memory or behavior? Has your mom been getting lost while running errands? Has your dad started to ask the same questions, over and over? Signs of the early stages of Alzheimer's disease aren't always clear-cut -- after all, it can be hard to distinguish them from age-related memory changes.

To help guide you, here are the Alzheimer's warning signs to watch for, along with advice about seeing a doctor and getting a diagnosis.

Alzheimer Disease Warning Signs

Many people confuse Alzheimer's disease with [dementia](#). What's the difference? Alzheimer's is a disease; dementia is a group of symptoms that include loss of memory, thinking, and reasoning skills. However, dementia isn't always caused by Alzheimer's disease; it can be result from other conditions as well.

Although some memory changes may be age-related, memory problems that interfere with daily life are not. According to experts, common early signs of Alzheimer's disease or other dementias include:

Memory loss. Although older memories might seem unaffected, people with dementia might forget recent experiences or important dates or events that interferes with daily life. Anyone can forget some details from a recent event or conversation or recall them later. People with dementia might forget the entire thing.

Repetition. People with dementia may repeat stories, sometimes word for word. They may keep asking the same questions, no matter how many times they're answered.

Language problems. We all struggle to remember a word occasionally. People with dementia can have profound problems remembering even basic words. Their way of speaking may become contorted and hard to follow.

Personality changes. People with dementia may have sudden mood swings. They might become emotional - upset or angry - for no particular reason. They might become withdrawn or stop doing things they usually enjoy. They could become uncharacteristically suspicious of family members -- or trusting of telemarketers.

Disorientation and confusion. People with dementia may get lost in places they know very well, like their own neighborhoods. They may have trouble completing basic and familiar tasks, like cooking dinner or [shaving](#).

Lack of hygiene. Sometimes this is the most obvious sign of Alzheimer's disease. People who have dressed smartly every day of their lives might start wearing stained clothing or stop bathing.

Odd behavior. We all misplace our keys from time to time. People with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias are prone to placing objects in odd and wholly inappropriate places. They might put a [toothbrush](#) in the fridge or milk in the cabinet under the sink.

If your loved one is exhibiting any of these Alzheimer's warning signs, don't [panic](#). Having these symptoms doesn't mean that your loved one necessarily has Alzheimer's disease. But you need to schedule an appointment with the doctor for an evaluation.

Seeing the Doctor With Alzheimer's Disease Concerns

For a first appointment, you can start with your loved one's primary care provider. Or you might go right to a specialist, like a [psychiatrist](#) or a neurologist. Over time, you may have a number of experts involved in your loved one's care.

Unfortunately, there's no definitive test for Alzheimer's disease. So doctors can use a number of different techniques to come up with a diagnosis. In addition to a typical [physical exam](#) and [blood](#) and urine tests, these could include:

Mental status tests. The doctor may ask a series of questions that assess a person's mental function. They test a person's short-term memory, ability to follow instructions, and problem-solving skills. Specific tests include the mini-mental state exam (MMSE) and the "mini-cog."

Neurological exams. In checking for signs of Alzheimer's, doctor will also check your loved one's neurological function, including speech, balance, coordination, and reflexes.

Imaging tests. CT scans, MRIs, and PET scans can help rule out other causes for the symptoms - like tumors or strokes.

Make sure to do your part. The doctor will need some basic information from you, so go in prepared with details about:

The Alzheimer's symptoms you've noticed and when they began.

Other health conditions your loved one has.

The daily [medications](#) she uses, including [supplements](#) and alternative treatments.

Your loved one's [diet](#) and alcohol use.

Any important changes in your loved one's life -- like retirement, a recent move, or the death of a spouse.

Because Alzheimer's warning signs may be confused with changes that can come with old age, its diagnosis may not be clear-cut.

If you're not satisfied with the doctor's assessment, get a second opinion. Alzheimer's disease can go on a long time, and during those years you'll need to work closely with a doctor. It's key that you find a caring, sympathetic healthcare professional you trust.

Don't Ignore Alzheimer's Warning Signs

Of course, you might not want to see a doctor yet. You might want to wait and see if things get worse. Many people put off consulting an expert for years - long after they've noticed obvious symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. Why?

People worry that their loved ones will be offended or angry if they mention their memory problems.

Considering that Alzheimer's disease has no cure, people might assume that there's no point in rushing off to get the bad news.

Deep down, people don't want to admit to themselves that something might be wrong.

These are all very understandable, very human reasons to put off seeing an expert. But if you suspect your loved one might have Alzheimer's, you need to see a doctor soon. Here's why.

Your loved one may not have Alzheimer's disease. Don't assume the worst. Even if your love one has dementia, it might not be Alzheimer's. Other conditions can cause dementia or similar symptoms. They include vitamin deficiencies, [thyroid problems](#), [depression](#), drug interactions, and [alcohol abuse](#). Many of these conditions are treatable. Putting off a trip to the doctor could leave your loved one suffering pointlessly.

The sooner Alzheimer's disease is diagnosed, the sooner you can get treatment. Alzheimer's disease isn't curable, but it is treatable. Drugs can help slow down the progression of Alzheimer's symptoms for a limited time. Your loved one may also be eligible for clinical trials, in which new, cutting-edge Alzheimer's treatments are available.

The sooner Alzheimer's disease is diagnosed, **the sooner you can plan for it.** Accepting that a loved one has Alzheimer's is terribly difficult. But the sooner you do, the better off you are. The earlier you catch it, the more time you'll have to learn about the condition and prepare for what's ahead.

For your loved one's sake -- and for your own -- don't ignore the possible warnings signs of Alzheimer's disease. Don't wait until there's a crisis before you see a doctor. If you have any concerns about your loved one's memory or behavior, schedule an evaluation now.

WebMD Medical Reference

SOURCES:

Alzheimer's Association web site: "Visiting Your Doctor," "Diagnosing Alzheimer's," "Early Detection," "Steps to Diagnosis," "See Your Doctor," "10 Signs of Alzheimer's."

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