



## the portage path behavioral health reference guide to: **Alzheimer's Disease**

**A**lzheimer's disease (AD) is a progressive, degenerative disease of the brain in which brain cells die and are not replaced. It results in impaired memory, thinking, and behavior, and is the most common form of dementing illness. The Alzheimer's Association reports that ten percent of those over 65, and almost half of those over the age of 85 have the disease, which makes AD the fourth leading cause of death for American adults. An estimated 4 million people are currently suffering from AD, and researchers suggest that by the year 2025 - due to the large number of aging baby boomers - a total of 14 million people will feel the affects of this illness.

### **Signs & Symptoms**

- Problems with language
- Poor or decreased judgment
- Misplacing things
- Aggression
- Changes in mood or behavior
- Changes in personality
- Loss of initiative
- Suspiciousness / paranoia
- Hallucinations
- Insomnia
- Recent memory loss that affects job skills
- Difficulty performing familiar tasks
- Disorientation of time and place
- Problems with abstract thinking

Alzheimer's disease affects both men and women in their 40s and 50s. The symptoms of AD are known to begin slowly, but how rapidly the disease advances is different for each person. Eventually, persons with AD symptoms or their families will seek medical attention due to the confusion, impaired judgement, and personality changes being experienced. If the disease receives proper attention at an early stage, families and friends can plan for future care. As the disease progresses, individuals will begin to have trouble speaking and thinking clearly, reading, writing, and understanding directions.

The federal government estimates spending \$400 million for Alzheimer's Disease research in 1999, and although the cause of the disease is still not known, researchers believe that age and family history are major risk factors that contribute to the onset of the disease. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services believes that genetic factors may be involved in more than half of the cases of AD. Other possible factors, such as genetics, environment, and viruses are now being researched.

By not being able to fully understand what causes the disease, a medical cure has yet to be developed. There are currently only three medications that provide temporary relief from some of the symptoms of this disease - (Aricept, Cognex, and Exelon). Non-pharmacological treatments are available and known to be helpful for reducing behavioral symptoms, such as depression, sleeplessness, and agitation. AD patients and caregivers who attend educational and counseling support groups find comfort in learning what to expect from the disease.



## How is Alzheimer's Disease Diagnosed?

Alzheimer's Disease can only be officially diagnosed after an autopsy is performed. To rule out other causes of dementia, such as strokes, depression, and Parkinson's disease, the following tests are given: mental status evaluation, physical examination, neurological examination, laboratory tests, neuropsychological evaluation, and a psychiatric evaluation. After all of the tests have been reviewed by a medical professional Probable and Possible Alzheimer's diagnoses can be made:

**Probable Alzheimer's:** a physician has ruled out all other disorders that may be causing the dementia and has come to the conclusion that the symptoms are most likely the result of Alzheimer's.

**Possible Alzheimer's:** a physician finds that Alzheimer's disease is the primary cause of the dementia, but another disorder may be affecting the known progression of Alzheimer's, so the disease process is different from what is normally seen.

The Alzheimer's Association reports that new diagnostic tools and criteria make it possible for physicians to make a positive clinical diagnosis of Alzheimer's with around 90 percent accuracy.



## Caring for Someone with Alzheimer's Disease

Due to the harshness of this disease, caring for a person with Alzheimer's disease is known to be a demanding task that is often taken on by a family member or close friend. In fact, the Alzheimer's Association reports that 75% of the home care is provided by family and friends in their original home setting. Receiving care from a family member or friend will benefit the patient, but caregivers who once knew the person in a different light, receive no benefits from watching a loved one decline in health. The demands of being an Alzheimer's disease caregiver can leave a person feeling very alone and disconnected from friends. Depending on the severity of the patient's condition, caregivers may not be able to provide a safe environment, fulfill household obligations, and ask others for assistance. In many cases, caregivers let themselves reach severe levels of stress before they accept assistance from anyone else.

To a person with AD, their caregiver is the most important person in their life; therefore, the health of their caregiver is just as important. In order for a caregiver to provide the best care for a person with AD, they must first take care of themselves.

The Alzheimer Society offers the following tips for caregivers:

- Take regular scheduled breaks.**
- Take time and keep up with things that are important to you.**
- Take time for yourself and prepare for a new caregiver to make short visits.**
- Create a Personal Care Book for the person being cared for. This log will help you keep important information on hand.**

If you have identified with the issues discussed in this flyer and you're ready to take the next step toward feeling better, visit our web site or call Portage Path and find out how we can help:

**Web Site** [www.portagepath.org](http://www.portagepath.org)

**Appointments** 330-253-3100  
800-828-4508

If you feel you're in emotional crisis and you need someone to talk to, call our free 24-hour, 7-day crisis hotline:

**Support Hotline** 330-434-9144  
888-434-8878



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