

Alzheimer's Disease



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Alzheimer's disease
the most common
form of Dementia

November is Alzheimer's disease Awareness Month and today's column is an effort to provide you with some of the most recent information on this disease. The information provided in this column is taken from the *2010 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures Report* produced by the Alzheimer's Association. The full report can be found at www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_facts_figures.asp. The report provides the definitions of Dementia and Alzheimer's disease, symptoms, and facts and figures.

Dementia is characterized by the loss of or decline in memory and other cognitive abilities. It is caused by various diseases and conditions that result in damaged brain cells. To be classified as dementia, the following criteria must be met:

- It must include decline in memory and in at least one of the following cognitive abilities:
 - 1) Ability to generate coherent speech or understand spoken or written language;
 - 2) Ability to recognize or identify objects, assuming intact sensory function;
 - 3) Ability to execute motor activities, assuming intact motor abilities, sensory function and comprehension of the required task; and
 - 4) Ability to think abstractly, make sound judgments and plan and carry out complex tasks.

- The decline in cognitive abilities must be severe enough to interfere with daily life.

Alzheimer's disease the most common type of dementia; accounts for an estimated 60–80 percent of cases. It characterized by difficulty remembering names and recent events is often an early clinical symptom; apathy and depression are also often early symptoms; later symptoms include impaired judgment, disorientation, confusion, behavior changes and difficulty speaking, swallowing and walking. Hallmark abnormalities are deposits of the protein fragment beta-amyloid (plaques) and twisted strands of the protein tau (tangles).

In Alzheimer's disease, as in other types of dementia, increasing numbers of nerve cells deteriorate and die. A healthy adult brain has 100 billion nerve cells, or neurons, with long branching extensions connected at 100 trillion points. At these connections, called synapses, information flows in tiny chemical pulses released by one neuron and taken up by the receiving cell. Different strengths and patterns of signals move constantly through the brain's circuits, creating the cellular basis of memories, thoughts and skills. In Alzheimer's disease, information transfer at the synapses begins to fail, the number of synapses declines and eventually cells die. Brains with advanced Alzheimer's show dramatic shrinkage from cell loss and widespread debris from dead and dying neurons.

The warning signs of Alzheimer's disease include memory loss that disrupts daily life; challenges in planning or solving problems; difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure; confusion with time or place; trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships; new problems with words in speaking or

writing; misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps; decreased or poor judgment; withdrawal from work or social activities; and/or changes in mood and personality.

Risk Factors for Alzheimer's Disease:

Although the cause or causes of Alzheimer's disease are not yet known, most experts agree that Alzheimer's, like other common chronic conditions, probably develops as a result of multiple factors rather than a single cause. The greatest risk factor for Alzheimer's disease is advancing age, but Alzheimer's is not a normal part of aging. Most Americans with Alzheimer's disease are aged 65 or older, although individuals younger than age 65 can also develop the disease.

A small percentage of Alzheimer's disease cases, probably less than 1 percent, are caused by rare genetic variations found in a small number of families worldwide.

Treatment and Prevention of Alzheimer's Disease:

No treatment is available to slow or stop the deterioration of brain cells in Alzheimer's disease. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved five drugs that temporarily slow worsening of symptoms for about six to 12 months, on average, for about half of the individuals who take them. Researchers have identified treatment strategies that may have the potential to change its course. Approximately 90 experimental therapies aimed at slowing or stopping the progression of Alzheimer's are in clinical testing in human volunteers. Despite the current lack of disease-modifying therapies, studies have consistently shown that active medical management of Alzheimer's and other dementias can significantly improve quality of life through all stages of the disease for

diagnosed individuals and their caregivers.

Prevalence of Alzheimer's Disease:

An estimated 5.3 million Americans of all ages have Alzheimer's disease. This figure includes 5.1 million people aged 65 and older and 200,000 individuals under age 65 who have younger-onset Alzheimer's.

The Alzheimer's Association estimates that there are 500,000 Americans younger than 65 with Alzheimer's and other dementias. Of these, approximately 40 percent are estimated to have Alzheimer's.

- One in eight people aged 65 and older (13 percent) have Alzheimer's disease.
- Every 70 seconds, someone in America develops Alzheimer's. By mid-century, someone will develop the disease every 33 seconds.
- Women are more likely than men to have Alzheimer's disease and other dementias.
- Based on estimates from the Aging, Demographics, and Memory Study (ADAMS), 14 percent of all people aged 71 and older have dementia.

This report includes more demographic information regarding Alzheimer's disease include state specific information. You can also find in the report predictions of the prevalence of Alzheimer's disease for the year 2025.

I hope this information has provided you with a better understanding of Alzheimer's disease and how it is affecting the United States population aged 65 and older.

The Mental Health Association invites you to participate in our Holiday Project of providing personal care items and gifts to individuals living in Lebanon County Personal Care Homes and the patients at Wernersville State Hospital. Please

contact the office at 717-273-5781 for more information. We wish you and your family a Happy Thanksgiving.

By Shem Heller, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association of Lebanon County