



How to Spot the Early Signs of Alzheimer's



The First Signs of Alzheimer's

We all lose our keys and forget where we put our reading glasses as we get older. It's normal. It's also not uncommon to occasionally forget a date or appointment, remembering it later. Even younger people can get disoriented and confused due to stress and distraction, or other influences. However, there are some early signs of Alzheimer's disease that may surprise you. They can be subtle, but if you spend time with your loved one and you are aware of these signs, you will recognize them as they slowly emerge.

Scientists and physicians are still working on ways to accurately diagnose Alzheimer's disease. Although many of the signs and symptoms are well known, they are not considered a clinical diagnosis. As it stands now, that can only be obtained after death. However, that should not stop you from consulting a physician should you worry that your loved one may be exhibiting the early signs of Alzheimer's.

Here we'll discuss the differences between normal aging and Alzheimer's, what the most surprising and common early signs of Alzheimer's are, and what you should know about diagnosis and treatment.

How Normal Aging and Alzheimer's Differ

It is not uncommon for people over 65-years-old to experience some memory loss on occasion, however forgetting things more frequently could signal an irregular part of aging. According to medical professionals around the world, the following are the most common early indicators of Alzheimer's:

1. Memory Loss.

Forgetting recently learned information is one of the most common, early signs of the disease. It's not about forgetting something someone said two days ago, but what was said five minutes ago: "Mom, let's go get the Christmas tree now." Mom gets her coat and says: "Where are we going again, the grocery store?" Forgetting names, important dates or events may also be a sign, but if these are remembered later, it's usually just typical age-related forgetfulness. Asking the same question or relaying the same information over, and over again, may also indicate memory loss related to Alzheimer's. But it may also simply mean someone is very distracted, pre-occupied, or tired. As we grow older, multitasking can be a tedious task, especially if we are stressed and sleep-deprived. The old joke is that we can't remember what we had for breakfast, but we can remember what we did on vacation 40 years ago. It's when memory loss begins to disrupt daily life, that we need to pay attention.

2. Planning and familiar tasks become a challenge.

The brain doesn't track as well when it's beset by the disease. An early indicator of the disease is when someone has difficulty figuring out what to wear or how to make coffee in the morning, tasks that were once simple and routine. When anything that involves working with numbers (making sense of numbers on a bill, for example) gets confusing, it may indicate one of the early signs of Alzheimer's. Forgetting to make a

Medicare payment one month is probably not an issue, nor is needing help figuring out how the four different remote controls for the television work. These are likely standard signs of aging.

3. Confusion with time and place.

With aging, we all sometimes forget what day of the week it is (especially if we're retired!) but if we're starting to forget that we already ate dinner, and we think it's time to walk the dog at midnight, and if we are confused about where we are on a regular basis, it may be more than standard aging. People with Alzheimer's often don't know how they got to where they are, for example, asking him or herself "why am I in the garage?"

4. Problems with speaking and writing.

Another early sign of Alzheimer's is when someone can't complete a sentence, forgets what they were saying or is stymied trying to find a word. My mother was an avid reader who prided herself on her vocabulary and grasp of the English language. With her dementia, she would struggle with finding the words she wanted; truly at a loss for words, she would give up. She would also use the wrong word sometimes and not know it: "the woof is making too much noise" (as in dog). Writing may become even more problematic when the usual visual, hand, brain coordination is compromised. Sometimes having trouble finding the right word is normal aging however, especially when you wake up at two in the morning remembering the word.



5. Misplacing things.

We all do this as we grow older. But usually we can retrace our steps and recall what we did and where we were, and with luck, we can recover the misplaced pair of sunglasses in the purse we were using the day before. A person with Alzheimer's starts to lose the ability to do this. Not only do they misplace things, they put items in unusual places. For example, my mother, who struggled with dementia for many years, once put her shoes in the microwave and my shoes in her closet. She liked to take things from my room, thinking they were hers, and "put them away."

6. Compromised decision making and judgement.

An early sign of Alzheimer's is often an unusual or odd judgement call, like a parent selling their home without telling anyone else in the family, or giving all the family china and silver to the gardener. Other questionable behavior may also be a sign, like walking into town in their pajamas and paying less attention to their overall grooming and upkeep. Whereas, the privileges of aging may include a certain eccentricity and paying less attention to protocol (normal aging), rash behavior and especially dangerous decision-making that puts one at risk is not.

7. Social withdrawal.

With retirement and aging, it is normal for some people to slow down and pull back from social obligations and other involvement, especially if they have had a demanding career and a busy life. If social withdrawal is dramatic however — someone who was always active, volunteering, engaged in a hobby, following sports and then suddenly withdraws and becomes reclusive — it may be an early sign of Alzheimer's. This may be a result of the individual recognizing they aren't as competent or comfortable in public situations due the changes in their brain chemistry; they may be pulling back to avoid embarrassment.

8. Changes in mood and personality.

This is one of the most difficult early signs of Alzheimer's to differentiate from normal aging, in my opinion. Once Alzheimer's has progressed, mood and personality changes are often so dramatic they are easier to differentiate from the cantankerous and nervous characteristics of normal aging. People who have been perfectly polite, charming, lovely people can get mean and nasty, distrustful, suspicious and, sadly, confused with Alzheimer's. These major personality shifts are some of the underlying challenges of caring for someone with Alzheimer's.

The Most Surprising Early Signs of Alzheimer's

Decades of research have shown that the buildup in the brain of toxic proteins, called beta amyloid and tau, can lead to Alzheimer's. What's less clear is what causes these proteins to accumulate. Some new studies have begun to explain this process, revealing that the causes of Alzheimer's disease go beyond genetics and unhealthy habits, and can start to build in your 40's. Here are some of the most surprising early signs of Alzheimer's that new science is pointing to:

1. Apathy.

Your loved one may start to withdraw socially and that is one of the most common early signs of Alzheimer's. He or she may act as though they are disinterested in social activities or family gatherings. Those who were very social may start to resist participating in activities that previously made them happy; going to lunch with friends, going to a matinee, or spending time with grandchildren. As your loved one begins to realize that it is difficult to process information and conversations, he or she will naturally seek to limit interactions. The disease may also make your loved one feel indifferent to social activities. You can help by restricting gatherings to a small number of people. Avoid noisy parties and instead, keep them small and familiar. If you find that even small gatherings agitate your loved one, visit by yourself or with one other person. It is important to maintain personal interaction in a way that is comfortable for your loved one.

2. Changes in personal appearance.

If you see that your loved one is not paying attention to personal hygiene or his or her appearance, it may be a sign of early Alzheimer's. The apathy that we mentioned regarding social interaction may also be a factor in whether or not a person wants to get dressed or comb his or her hair. If you notice that your loved one hasn't showered or taken a bath in days, hasn't changed clothing or has stopped going to the hairdresser or barber, it may be a sign of early Alzheimer's disease. You can help. As part of dementia caregiving, it will require that you visit your loved one to assist

with personal hygiene and grooming, or you can hire a skilled at-home caregiver to help with those tasks. You can't tell your loved one that he or she needs to pay attention to personal hygiene because the disease will prevent them from understanding, or remember the admonition.

3. The onset of anxiety and depression.

As your loved one's memory and ability to process new environments decline, anxiety may increase. If your loved one can't remember where he or she is going or what the family is going to do next it can lead to higher anxiety levels. Anxiety is a common symptom of Alzheimer's disease as it robs the person's ability to process the surrounding environment.

There is also a clinical link between Alzheimer's disease and depression. Researchers aren't completely clear on whether depression is a cause of Alzheimer's disease or a reaction to it. Regardless, the fact is that if your loved one appears to become increasingly depressed and anxious it is worth visiting his or her primary care physician. Medication may help to alleviate some of the anxiety and depression and help your loved one to feel better.

4. Changes in vision.

Your loved one may perceive that something is wrong with his or her vision when in fact it hasn't changed. It is not the eye that is changing, it is the brain's ability to process vision. The part of the brain that processes the images we see may deteriorate faster than other parts, leading the person suffering from Alzheimer's disease to believe that his or her eyesight is changing.

How Early Alzheimer's is Diagnosed

Although there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease and its progression cannot be stopped, it can be slowed. Some medications have proven effective in delaying memory and cognitive decline. Early diagnosis can help the person who has been diagnosed and their family prepare for the future.

The diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease depends upon collecting information through an interview with your loved one. The physician will ask him or her, as well as a member of your family (preferably the person closest to your loved one), about overall health, changes in behavior or personality traits, the ability to carry out daily activities and past medical history. The physician may also conduct memory tests, and use tools that assess problem-solving capabilities, attention span, counting and language skills.

Medical tests will be conducted, including blood and urine tests in order to rule out other causes of the symptoms. For example, if the cause of the symptom is vascular dementia instead of Alzheimer's, clinical tests will detect narrowing of the arteries, which can be treated to improve the symptoms of dementia. Brain scans will also be conducted. Depending upon the physician's preference, these may include a CT scan, MRI or PET scan. These cannot detect Alzheimer's disease but they can rule out other causes of the symptoms.

Although this information will help the physician to make a diagnosis, there is no exact method by which a clinician can make a definitive diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. It is challenging because the symptoms of the disease can be seen, although there are

no definitive signs it can be seen in the brain through medical imaging. If someone suffers a heart attack, imaging can see the damage in

the heart. This is not the case with Alzheimer's disease.

In some cases, it may be helpful to get a second opinion. A neurologist that is experienced in Alzheimer's can review the records and give you a diagnosis. Then you will have more information to work with.

The National Institute on Aging suggests the following plans be made after a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease has been made:

- Plan for the future when your loved one will be unable to make a decision independently.
- Take care of financial and legal matters.
- Address potential safety issues in the home.
- Learn about supportive, specialized living arrangements outside the home.
- Develop support networks for the person who has been diagnosed, family members and caregivers.

A diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease can be devastating for everyone involved. It can also be helpful. If family members know that a loved one is suffering from a progressive disease, plans can be made for appropriate care. Gather as much information as possible and learn everything you can about the disease. Knowledge is power, in the case of Alzheimer's disease and caring for a parent or a loved one with it, can help you provide the structure, support, and life assistance that he or she will need to navigate the journey ahead.



We Are Here to Help You When You Need Us

If you are considering Alzheimer's care options, a family caregiver in need of respite, or simply looking for some advice, please don't hesitate to give me a call directly at **925-989-6877**.

My team and I have worked with thousands of older adults suffering from Alzheimer's and other dementias, ranging from mild to severe impairment. We understand the importance of comfort and familiarity for our clients who suffer from dementia and that the right - often a familiar - environment and an experienced and skilled caregiver can mean the difference between a good day and a bad day.

Our first priority is to maintain a safe home environment, so your loved one can continue to age in place. In addition, we are committed to long-term caregiver relationships - most of our clients choose to have the same caregiver work with them for years. The consistency of our staffing allows your loved one to build a bond with our caregiver and to think of us like family.

Take care of yourself so that caring for a loved one does not take a toll on your well-being. We are here to help you wherever and whenever you may need.

- Francesca Vogel



Francesca Vogel, Home Care Liaison
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