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## Healthy Insights

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## Alzheimer's and Dementia

Alzheimer's disease affects six million American adults and is the seventh leading cause of death in the United States. Although you may have heard of Alzheimer's, you may not know its signs. Catching the symptoms of Alzheimer's early may allow you to function normally for a longer amount of time before severe changes begin.

### Dementia vs. Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's disease and dementia are terms that often get confused. However, they are not the same thing. While Alzheimer's is a specific disease, dementia is a general term for a group of symptoms. Dementia is a loss of normal functioning because of changes to thinking, remembering, and reasoning skills. There are different types of dementia. Alzheimer's is one of them, along with Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal disorders, and vascular dementia.

### How Alzheimer's Affects the Brain

Alzheimer's is a brain disorder that causes one to lose the ability to perform tasks that were once easy. For someone developing Alzheimer's, changes are happening in their brain tissue, sometimes even a decade before the physical signs and symptoms of Alzheimer's show.

The brain of a person with Alzheimer's has abnormal buildups of proteins that begin to form clumps (called amyloid plaques) and tangled fibers (called tau tangles). Scientists have also found that neurons, the parts of the brain that send signals, lose their connections to each other. Their brain also shrinks over time.



### Forgetfulness or Serious Issue?

You may be reading through these symptoms and worrying that you see them in yourself or a loved one. Here are some examples of the difference between Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI), which may develop as a normal part of the aging process, and symptoms of Alzheimer's disease:

- Someone with MCI may lose their keys or reading glasses, but be able to find them later.
- *Someone with Alzheimer's may lose items frequently and won't be able to retrace their steps to find them.*
- Someone with MCI could have trouble coming up with the name of objects, like the TV remote.
- *Someone with Alzheimer's will be totally unable to follow a conversation.*
- Someone with MCI will forget the date.
- *Someone with Alzheimer's will forget what season it is.*

### Stages of Alzheimer's

With each stage of Alzheimer's, a person's ability to live independently decreases. Each stage has specific symptoms and behaviors.

## STAGE 1 - Mild Alzheimer's

- Wandering and getting lost
- Repeating questions
- Taking longer to complete daily tasks, like cooking
- Being moody
- Having trouble paying bills

## STAGE 2 - Moderate Alzheimer's

- Acting without thinking (impulsivity)
- Seeing, feeling, or hearing things that aren't there (hallucinations)
- Falsely believing that people want to harm you (paranoia)
- Not recognizing family and friends

## STAGE 3 - Severe Alzheimer's

- Not talking or communicating with others
- Relying on family, friends, or caretakers for help
- Lying or sitting in bed for most of the time
- Not being able to control body movement

## Can You Prevent Alzheimer's?

Genes do play a role in the development of Alzheimer's. However, there is research showing that the worsening of thinking skills may be linked to diabetes and obesity. Following a healthy diet rich in whole foods, fruit, lean meats, and whole grains can help prevent Alzheimer's from developing. Exercising and spending time with family and friends can help too.

## Coping with Alzheimer's

If you or someone you love develops Alzheimer's, it's important to know how to cope with these changes. Here are some ways to help manage an Alzheimer's diagnosis:

- Visit the Eldercare Locator at <https://eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Index.aspx> or call them at 800-677-1116 for resources, services, and support for older adults.
- Use memory aids, like a pillbox to organize medication, a calendar to document upcoming events, and sticky notes to remember important tasks.
- Continue to stay active and eat healthy foods.
- As for support from family or friends with everyday tasks like cleaning and cooking.
- See your primary care doctor and specialist regularly.

## Sources

[https://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/10\\_signs](https://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/10_signs)

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<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/next-steps-after-alzheimers-diagnosis>

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I PRO is a non-profit organization that works with government agencies, providers and patients to measure and improve healthcare for all. For over 35 years we've made creative use of clinical expertise, emerging technology and data solutions to make the healthcare system work better.



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