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Resident Characteristics & Assessments Alzheimer's Disease

Understanding Alzheimer's Disease

There are over 5 million Americans who have Alzheimer's disease, a number that is expected to rise to 14 million by 2050. So what is Alzheimer's disease? Alzheimer's disease is a degenerative brain disorder that gradually destroys memory and cognitive functioning. There is no cure for Alzheimer's and it eventually results in death. Alzheimer's is fairly new to medical literature. The first case was recorded by Dr. Alois Alzheimer, a German psychiatrist, in 1901. Dr. Alzheimer noted changes in the brain tissue of a woman who had this disease. He found both amyloid plaques, or irregular clumps, and neurofibrillary tangles, or bunched up fibers, in his patient's brain. Today, doctors agree that both these physical changes are typical of Alzheimer's. Doctors have also learned that patients' nerve cells die and nerve connections are disrupted, leading to decreased memory and thinking. Alzheimer's disease is a type of dementia, a group of disorders in which loss of brain cells leads to diminished mental function. Symptoms vary by individual and the progression of the disease, but most people with Alzheimer's experience degenerative memory loss and difficulty performing basic tasks. Many people with the disease often experience behavioral changes, rapid mood swings and loss of initiative. These symptoms, which are characteristic of the disease, can strike anyone. In 1994, former President Ronald Reagan joined the ranks of those diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. In 2004, Reagan died of Alzheimer's disease at 93-years of age. Scientists haven't yet found a 'reason' why brain cells fail and amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles develop. But there are several factors that can increase a person's chance of developing this disease. The greatest risk factor is age. Most people with the disease are 65 or older. For people over 85, the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease rises to almost 50 percent. Another risk factor is the patient's family history. Those who have a grandparent, parent, or sibling with Alzheimer's are more likely to develop the condition themselves. Similarly, scientists know that genes play a role in the disease. A strong link between head injury and Alzheimer's disease has also been established. Brain health is connected to heart health, so high blood pressure, heart disease, high cholesterol and stroke can all increase the chances of developing this form of dementia. Because Alzheimer's can strike anyone, it's important to be aware of the symptoms and risk factors, and to seek immediate treatment if you are experiencing abnormal memory loss or sudden personality changes.

Stages of Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is degenerative, which means it becomes worse over time. Learn what to expect as Alzheimer's progresses. Alzheimer's disease is a degenerative brain disorder which usually occurs in people over 65. Alzheimer's is fatal when the body ceases to function due to a complication of the disease, such as pneumonia. This disease can last anywhere from three to twenty years, averaging about seven to eight. The first sign is memory loss, followed by personality changes, and progressing to a loss of control over bodily functions. These changes gradually happen, in a generally distinguishable set of stages. In the early, or mild, stages of Alzheimer's, symptoms are not immediately evident. Then, a patient will begin to suffer small memory lapses, such as forgetting the names of familiar places or people. As Alzheimer's progresses, the afflicted individual may experience confusion about everyday tasks and people. They often become disoriented about time and place and tend to exercise poor judgment. More than 40 percent of people with early-stage Alzheimer's exhibit apathy about their life and condition. People with early-stage Alzheimer's can often continue living as they have been for some time, particularly when prescription medication is taken. However, the ability to live independently may be lost as an individual enters mid-stage Alzheimer's. At this point, patients often lose cognitive function rapidly, forgetting recent events and even their personal history. They may have trouble sorting out the names and faces of familiar people, and often forget personal information, like their home address or telephone number. Mid-stage Alzheimer's patients experience personality changes, as well, often becoming withdrawn. In addition, they may exhibit paranoid behavior and can even have hallucinations. People with mid-stage Alzheimer's have an increasing

dependence on others, and may need help eating, dressing, grooming and using the toilet. Gradually, control of bodily function begins to decline as a person enters late-stage Alzheimer's. People in the late stage require round-the-clock care. People with late-stage Alzheimer's usually won't recognize others, or even know their own name. They can no longer communicate or move around without assistance. As Alzheimer's runs its course, the body slowly shuts down, and a resulting medical condition, like pneumonia, will lead to death. Although Alzheimer's disease is fatal, prescription medications can often help patients to maintain their quality of life for longer periods of time. The personality changes, cognitive lapses and eventual demise of a person with Alzheimer's disease are extremely difficult on both patients and their loved ones. For this reason, it is important to seek guidance and support from a doctor and care team.

Treatment for Alzheimer's Disease

The memory loss typical of Alzheimer's disease can be devastating, both to the individuals affected and to their family and friends. Luckily, some treatments may help. Alzheimer's disease is a brain disorder of the elderly that currently has no cure. Still, medication options and non-drug treatment strategies can help patients and their families deal with its symptoms and consequences. Until recently, the only FDA-approved Alzheimer's drugs were the cholinesterase inhibitors. Today, these medications are marketed under the brand names Aricept, Exelon and Razadyne. Cholinesterase inhibitors prevent the breakdown of a neurotransmitter called acetylcholine, which is important in the memory and thinking process. Unfortunately, cholinesterase inhibitors only work in about half of the people who try them, and they may lose their effectiveness as Alzheimer's disease progresses. In addition, these medications can have significant side effects, including diarrhea, nausea and vomiting. Several years ago, a new drug called Memantine, sold under the brand name Namenda, was approved to treat moderate to severe cases of Alzheimer's. Memantine is a drug that protects the brain from overexposure to glutamate, a normal neurotransmitter that, in excess, contributes to the death of brain cells in people with Alzheimer's. While treating Alzheimer's disease is important, it can also be beneficial to treat its symptoms. Patients in all stages of Alzheimer's may experience psychiatric symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, agitation, irritability, and hallucinations. Generally, these behaviors are managed by identifying the behavior and its cause and then adapting the patient's environment to improve the situation. Often, the trigger for these symptoms is a change in the person's environment, such as hospitalization or travel. Treatment usually focuses on redirecting the patient's attention, often by simplifying routines or allowing rest between stimulating events. However, if behavioral symptoms persist, a doctor may prescribe medication to treat a patient's particular symptoms. Some common ailments that doctors medicate for include general blue moods and irritability, which are treated with antidepressants, like Prozac or Zoloft; anxiety, restlessness and disruptive behavior, which are treated with anxiolytics, like Ativan and Serax; and hallucinations, aggression and uncooperativeness, which are treated with antipsychotic medications, like Haldol and Risperdal. Sleep aids may be prescribed for Alzheimer's patients who experience night terrors, or who are not sleeping well. But even with the best treatment, medications, and care, Alzheimer's disease is progressive, and will continue to worsen with time. That's why scientists are hard at work to uncover new treatments that may benefit the Alzheimer's community. It's vitally important for people with Alzheimer's to have the support of family, friends and professional caregivers as they deal with the consequences of the disease.

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