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## Alzheimer's in Seniors & Treatments

### A Worldwide Epidemic

When we think of Alzheimer's disease, it isn't uncommon to picture someone who, in the midst of conversing, forgets his or her train of thought, or has trouble remembering a recent event. While this depiction is certainly indicative of its earlier stages, Alzheimer's is a progressive disease and has a much more profound effect on the mind over time – to the point where afflicted individuals cannot perform even the most basic tasks. Alzheimer's is truly a degenerative brain disease, and affects millions of individuals worldwide. In fact, it's estimated that someone develops Alzheimer's every 66 seconds, and it is continually noted as the sixth leading cause of death in the United States.

### **Fast Fact**

According to the Alzheimer's Association, since 2000, heart disease-related deaths have decreased 14%, while Alzheimer's-related deaths have increased 89%.

Many aging adults believe that Alzheimer's is simply a normal part of aging, which is inaccurate. As we age, our brains also age, and there is a degree of normal forgetfulness that comes along with it, but Alzheimer's is in a different league entirely.

### Alzheimer's: A Closer Look

Alzheimer's is considered a form of dementia, a group of symptoms associated with the loss of cognitive and behavioral functioning, which ultimately interfere with daily life. There are several forms of dementia, including Lewy body, frontotemporal disorder, and vascular dementia, but Alzheimer's is far and away the most common form – accounting for nearly 80% of dementia cases. Researchers find that Alzheimer's tends to start ten years before the onset of memory issues or other cognitive problems. However, within those ten years, many changes take place.

It's believed that Alzheimer's occurs when brain cells become damaged and, eventually, die off, causing changes that are wholly irreversible. There are two primary culprits for this brain cell damage: plaques and tangles. Plaques are clusters of protein fragments that cluster together and build up between nerve cells, while tangles represent twisted strands of the tau protein that build up inside of the cells. While scientists cannot say definitively the role that plaques and tangles play when it comes to Alzheimer's, it's thought that they are responsible for prohibiting communication between nerve cells and sabotaging normal processes within the cells, respectively.

Toward the beginning of the disease's development, these plaques and tangles form within the areas of the brain that facilitate learning/memory and thinking/planning. As it progresses, these areas develop more plaques and tangles, but more of each also spread to areas that conduct speech and awareness. It's at this stage that people begin to go through severe changes in personality and behavior. And in the final stages, with the brain's cortex significantly damaged, the ability to communicate and recognize loved ones is lost.

### Treatment

#### **Medication:**

Presently, there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease. There are, however, medications that can help slow the progression and help manage the disease's symptoms. The five approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) include Donepezil, Galantamine, Memantine, Rivastigmine, and Donepezil & Memantine. Most of these drugs work by regulating neurotransmitters, chemicals within the brain that help facilitate the movement of information between neurons.

Depending on the level of behavioral dysfunction, doctors may suggest that Alzheimer's patients take antidepressants to help control symptoms. This should be done under close scrutiny of a physician, as these medications (as well as anti-anxiety or sleep medications) can be detrimental to one's health. There may also be a desire to seek "alternative" treatments, in the form of natural supplements or foods. Unlike the medications listed above, which go through rigorous scientific evaluation and validation by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), these alternative means of treatment or symptom control are largely unregulated – and the contents within can be harmful to one's health.

### ***Environment & Lifestyle:***

While medication can help with the biological aspects of Alzheimer's, there are steps that you or a family caregiver can take to make life more comfortable for a loved one. One of the best ways is to control their environment in a way that supports their well-being and reduces/eliminates confusion as much as possible. For instance, all valuable objects (car keys, cell phone, wallet, etc.) should be consistently placed in one centralized location in the house. Any type of organization tools (schedulers, calendars, whiteboards, etc.) that allow your loved one to keep track of appointments can be extraordinarily helpful as well. It's also recommended that you reduce the number of mirrors in the house as reflected images can cause confusion. Conversely, the house should be full of meaningful photographs or objects to help ground your loved one.

Consistency with lifestyle choices is also important for those with Alzheimer's, as it is conducive to maintaining physical and mental wellbeing. For starters, be sure that your loved one is following a regular exercise routine (at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity with physician approval). Not only does this keep the body healthy, it can also improve one's mood. Nutrition is important for essentially the same reasons, but the consistency part is even more vital here. In the later stages of Alzheimer's, it's not uncommon for individuals to forget about getting proper nutrition or drinking enough water. All meals should fall on the same time, each and every day, with as little variance as possible.

### **Comfort Keepers® Can Help**

If you have a loved one who has recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, Comfort Keepers® can provide the support he or she needs. Our specially trained caregivers understand what it takes to preserve the happiness, health, and independence of those you love. Give us a call today to learn about our Alzheimer's & Dementia Care and other services.

### **References:**

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