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Home > Other Emotional Health Issues > Alzheimer's Disease

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Understanding Alzheimer's Disease (2 min read)

Alzheimer's is a disease that causes changes in areas of the brain that control memory and reasoning. Why the disease develops is not yet fully understood. At present, it has no cure. But proper care can help most people with Alzheimer's live a comfortable life for many years.

How the Brain Works

The brain controls all the workings of the body and mind. Different areas of the brain control different functions. Certain areas control physical tasks such as walking. Other areas control language skills. Still others control mental tasks such as remembering, concentrating, and decision-making.

Changes in the Brain

In people with Alzheimer's, microscopic structures, called **plaques** and **tangles**, start to form. Brain cells then begin to die. The areas of the brain affected by these changes are the ones that control mental functions such as memory. Other functions, such as movement, are generally not affected until very late in the illness. That's why people with Alzheimer's disease look normal, but cannot form new memories no matter how hard they try.

Who Gets Alzheimer's?

Alzheimer's disease tends to affect people over 65. The older you are, the more likely you are to develop the disease. But people as young as 40 can be affected. All types of people get Alzheimer's. No profession, education level, or race is immune. In some cases, Alzheimer's runs in the family. In other cases, no other family members are affected.

The Effects of Alzheimer's Disease

Symptoms of the disease appear slowly. The average length of time from the first through the last stage is about 9 years. This time can vary widely.

- **In the early stage**, the person seems confused and forgetful. Recent events and conversations are often forgotten. The person may lose important items. However, the distant past may be remembered clearly.
- **In the middle stage**, more help is needed with daily tasks. The person may not know family members, may get lost in familiar places, and may forget how to do simple tasks. He or she may be restless, moody, and unpredictable.
- **In the late stage**, memory, judgment, and reason may be lost completely. Help with every aspect of daily life is generally needed.

Treating Alzheimer's Disease

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The goals of treatment are to manage symptoms and keep your loved one comfortable.

- **Medications** may improve symptoms in some cases. The doctor can determine which medications may help your loved one.
- **A management plan** that includes care and supervision is essential.
- **Regular doctor visits** help keep track of your loved one's condition.

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