What is Alzheimer’s?

According to the CDC, [Alzheimer’s](https://www.cdc.gov/aging/aginginfo/alzheimers.htm#:~:text=Alzheimer's%20disease%20is%20the%20most,thought%2C%20memory%2C%20and%20language.) disease has been found to be the most common cause of dementia, otherwise known as a loss of cognitive capabilities that negatively impacts the quality of a person’s life. Witnessing a loved one as they experience the disease can be heartbreaking, difficult, and confusing. The more you know about Alzheimer’s, the better chance you have of navigating experiencing a loved one deal with it.

This Alzheimer’s and Brain Awareness Month, we want to help you learn more about the disease, ways to care for your own cognitive health, and tips for coping when a loved one has Alzheimer’s.

# What is Alzheimer’s Disease?

Alzheimer’s is a form of dementia that slowly disrupts and destroys the brain’s skills to think and remember. It can eventually lead to a person’s impairment to perform even the simplest of tasks. The disease is most commonly observed in people in their mid-60s. However, it has impacted some people as early as 30 years old.

Alzheimer’s disease is considered the [most common form of dementia](https://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/facts-figures) amongst people in their later stages of life, impacting an estimated 6 million Americans today. The disease got its name from [Dr. Alois Alzheimer](https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-alzheimers-disease), the doctor who discovered physical changes in the brain tissue of a patient who passed from mental illness.

After the patient’s passing, Dr. Alzheimer examined her brain and found a number of abnormal plaques and tangles, which are defining characteristics of the disease today. Along with these plaques and tangles come a disconnection between the brain’s neurons, which prevents the brain from sending important messages to different parts of the brain and body.

# Signs and Symptoms of Alzheimer’s Disease

Alzheimer’s disease will not look the same from person to person. However, there are a few defining characteristics of the disease. One of the first and most prominent symptoms one may notice is issues with memory.

While memory impairment is one of the first and most well-known symptoms of the disease, it is not the only one. Other signs and symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease will vary depending on the severity of the disease and can include:

## Mild Alzheimer’s Disease Symptoms

When one is experiencing mild Alzheimer’s disease, they will oftentimes appear healthy. However, there will be a few symptoms that can point to mild symptoms of Alzheimer’s, such as:

* Memory impairment that impacts one’s daily life
* Loss of sense of creativity, spontaneity, and initiative
* Loss or impairment of decision-making skills
* Impaired problem-solving skills
* Sudden struggles with finances
* Sudden struggles with dates and current setting
* Appearing to get lost or lose things more often
* Beginning to struggle with everyday tasks
* Appearing to forget recent information or events
* Sudden changes to mood, character, or personality
* Mood swings, increased anxiety, irritability, and aggression

## Moderate Alzheimer’s Disease Symptoms

As the disease progresses and becomes moderate, one may begin to need more assistance in living their everyday lives. Some moderate symptoms of the disease include:

* More intense memory loss and confusion
* Learning impairment
* Language difficulties
* Struggling to think logically
* Struggling to organize thoughts
* Repetitive behaviors, statements, or actions
* Forgetting important life or historical events they once knew
* Social withdrawal and beginning to forget loved ones
* Struggles with performing simple tasks
* Changes to eating and sleeping patterns
* Hallucinations and delusions
* Anxiety, paranoia, agitation, irritability, and emotional outbursts
* Impulsive and often inappropriate behaviors
* Appearing to wander and act restless more often

## Severe Alzheimer’s Disease Symptoms

As the severity of the disease continues to progress, a person will eventually experience symptoms that severely impact their ability to live independently and interact with others. The body and mind will begin to shut down, and the person will become bed-ridden.

Severe Alzheimer’s Disease will prevent the person experiencing it from being able to communicate. Their awareness of the time, their location, and the things and people surrounding them will deteriorate. Along with the cognitive decline, a person experiences, they will begin to experience physical health issues, struggle to eat, and sleep more often.

# Tips for Caring for Cognitive Health

While there are a few treatments available to help manage symptoms of the illness, there is, unfortunately, no cure for Alzheimer’s disease. However, there is some research that suggests one may be able to prevent Alzheimer’s and dementia by caring for their mental health.

While there are not yet any definitive answers behind Alzheimer’s prevention, some healthy habits research has found to potentially prevent the disease include:

## Regular Exercise

The Alzheimer’s Society examined 11 different studies regarding the [effects of physical exercise on preventing Alzheimer’s](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/risk-factors-and-prevention/physical-exercise#:~:text=Combining%20the%20results%20of%2011,reduced%20by%2045%20per%20cent.) and found that regular exercise may significantly reduce one’s risk of developing dementia by thirty percent and Alzheimer’s, in particular, a whopping forty-five percent!

## Eating a Healthy Diet

Diets that emphasize whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats, like the Mediterranean and MIND, general healthy diets have been suggested to have significant [cognitive health benefits](https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-do-we-know-about-diet-and-prevention-alzheimers-disease), although the evidence it may help prevent Alzheimer’s is not as strong as the evidence behind exercise for prevention.

## Social Connection

Research suggests that a healthy social life is associated with a [reduced risk of mental and physical disability and mortality](https://www.alz.org/help-support/brain_health/stay_mentally_and_socially_active). Working to maintain an active social life can be an incredible way of caring for your cognitive health and overall wellbeing.

## Keeping Mentally Active

Challenging your brain every day can be incredible for caring for your cognitive health. Some experts believe this may be because the mental activity from mental exercises may strengthen connections between cells, ultimately helping to protect the brain.

Ultimately, making healthy lifestyle choices can be beneficial for your brain, body, and overall wellbeing. While the research still has a way to go regarding prevention of Alzheimer’s and dementia, instilling these healthy habits are beneficial for every part of your life.

# Coping When a Loved One Has Alzheimer’s

Experiencing a loved one living with Alzheimer’s can be heartbreaking. It is important that, as you put in the effort to care for them and cherish your time with them, you are also putting the effort in to care for yourself.

This means you should be taking time to care for your own mental, physical, and emotional health. Cherish the good times. Work to become more flexible. Embrace nostalgia and remember past good times with fondness.

As you spend time with your loved one, know that there will likely be moments of misinterpretation or confusion, and prepare yourself to cope with them. As you observe your loved one, work to see the world through their eyes. This can help you better understand where they are coming from as they navigate their own world.

When someone you love is experiencing Alzheimer’s disease, its impact on your mental health can be detrimental. The grief and heartbreak you experience as you witness this disease's effects on your loved one can seriously impact your quality of life. Seeking the help of a therapist through the form of grief counseling may help you find the strength you need to get through this difficult time.

If you are ready to seek the help of a mental health professional to help you get through your grief, our compassionate and professional therapists are here for you. [Contact](http://michiganpsychologicalcare.com/contact.php) us today.

Keywords: cognitive health, Alzheimer’s, therapy, grief

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