



8th in a continuing series supporting chronic disease management

Dispelling the myths

Over the years, many myths have evolved about Alzheimer's disease. Here are a few clarifications:

1. Because a family member has Alzheimer's, I'm going to get it too.

Although genetics plays a role in Alzheimer's disease, only seven per cent of cases are associated with the genes that cause the early-onset inherited familial form of the disease (FAD).

2. Memory loss means Alzheimer's disease.

Many people have trouble with their memory, but that does not in itself mean they have the disease.

3. Aluminum causes Alzheimer's disease.

Although there has been much research into the connection between aluminum and Alzheimer's disease, there is no conclusive evidence to show a link.

Driving risks

Alzheimer's disease gradually affects the skills and abilities needed for driving. Here are some signs to watch for:

- Traffic violations
- Accidents
- Getting lost
- Misjudging distances
- Forgetting the rules of the road
- Slow response times
- Taking too long to reach a destination

Living with Alzheimer's disease

With approximately half a million Canadians living with Alzheimer's disease or another related dementia and the number forecast to double over the next 25 years, it is important to watch for and identify any early warning signs. Finding resources, obtaining accurate information and asking for assistance are the best ways to start planning for future care.

What to look for

Recognizing the symptoms and how they differ from normal aging may help to identify Alzheimer's disease more rapidly and allow for timely treatment and better care. Early diagnosis can make a significant difference in the lives of both patients and



their caregivers.

While Alzheimer's disease affects all people differently, it progresses slowly, gradually following three stages—early, middle and late—over the course of eight to 12 years. As it impacts different parts of the brain, various functions are impaired. This could mean changes to memory, orientation, language, behaviour or the performance of daily activities.

continued on page 3

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I N S I D E

Caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease **2**

Alzheimer's Facts **3**

For more information **4**

Ask our experts **4**



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Caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease

Caregiving can be a challenge at the best of times, but it can also be rewarding. Solving problems and becoming confident in knowing how to give the best care can be a source of great satisfaction. When someone has just been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, the news will be upsetting both for the individual and his or her friends and family. Everyone is likely to worry about behavioural changes and be anxious about the future. If you are the primary caregiver, or an involved family member, there are things you can do right away that might make life a little easier for yourself and others.

Expect a variety of emotions

The news of the diagnosis and the changes it will bring can cause feelings of anger, denial, embarrassment, frustration, fear, sadness and guilt. People sometimes become depressed or overwhelmed and need to ask for help from their family doctor. You should know that these emotions are normal and common among caregivers and those they are caring for, and that they can come and go.

Learn about the disease

It is important to understand as much as possible about Alzheimer's disease and its effects on a loved one's behaviour. Learn about the disease and providing care. Find out how the disease can affect a person, what changes to expect and how to arrange for the help and support that's necessary to maintain a person's independence and quality of life. Share this information with the others close to the patient, such as family members, friends and co-workers, to help them understand.

In addition, consider contacting the local chapter of the Alzheimer Society for assistance



and helpful literature, tips and tools. Ask about local support groups for family caregivers—it will be easy to find others in similar situations who will be more than happy to share their ideas and personal experiences.

Don't lose sight of the person

Individuals with Alzheimer's disease do not stop needing what made them feel happy and content in the past. They will want to stay in contact with family and friends, and still need to feel secure and comfortable wherever they're living. If poetry, music or a walk in the woods were enjoyable and satisfying to them before their diagnosis then it is important to try to maintain such activities as a part of their daily routine in order to keep those fond memories alive.

No matter how the disease affects the individual, it is important to treat him or her with dignity and respect. Although certain mental and physical abilities will be lost, the person's emotions and feelings will remain the same. As always, individuals will have the basic human need for companionship and belonging. Through providing activities and social interactions that bring a sense of joy, caregivers can help their charges

to focus on and celebrate their remaining abilities. This will go a long way in adding quality of life and helping individuals with Alzheimer's disease to maintain a sense of self.

Everyone deserves to be treated with respect. This can be measured in the little things, such as the way you help a loved one get dressed, how you take him or her to the toilet and whether you talk about your loved one to others when he or she is still in the room. We all need to remember how important these things are.

Maintaining religious practice

Most people think first about the physical care that the person with Alzheimer's disease will need, but the spiritual side of a person's nature also needs care and nourishment. Maintaining religious practices may be as important to sustaining a routine as having a cup of tea in the morning.

All individuals with Alzheimer's disease should be able to continue participating in the services of their own house of worship. If they can no longer attend religious services, it may be possible for a minister, priest, rabbi or other religious leader to come to the home. Lighting candles on the Sabbath, taking communion, watching religious

services on television and listening to spiritual music may be comforting ways to help fill a person's particular needs.

Caregiving takes a toll

Providing care to a person with Alzheimer's disease can be difficult at times. Whether you are a professional or a loved one, as a caregiver you are at risk for severe physical and emotional stress. Those providing care should be aware of this and take steps to care for themselves. Staying active, making healthy food choices and making time for favourite activities are all a part of being healthy and can minimize the risk of compromised care. It can be helpful to develop a support network where caregivers can meet and share their feelings, frustrations and challenges, as well as their successes and happy stories. Either way finding someone to vent to is crucial. This may be a member of your family or support group, a good friend or someone at your local branch of the Alzheimer Society. Caregivers often become isolated and lonely, so it is important to stay connected to the people around you.

Call your local branch of the Alzheimer Society to find out what help is available to you in your area. Community agencies may offer practical services such

as assistance with household or caregiving tasks. There are probably also community programs in your area so learn how the services work, what you can expect from them and how you can access them.

Family and friends might be willing to lend a hand, but be sure to determine what kind of help you need and to think about your strengths and weaknesses and what would help you in your caregiving role. Family and friends often want to help, but don't know what to do. Decide who is the best candidate for helping out and then ask for assistance.

Plan for the future

Decisions about work and personal issues need to be made while they are able to be involved in the decision-making process. Help them to get all paperwork and finances in order and ensure that someone has been chosen to make financial and healthcare decisions when they become unable to do so. Make certain the individual has talked about healthcare decisions and has documented his or her wishes. Legal and estate planning should also be discussed. Create an alternate plan should you be unable to continue to provide care.

If you or your loved one is still working, discuss the diagnosis

Some more facts

- Of the 500,000 Canadians who have Alzheimer's disease, more than 70,000 are under the age of 65 years
- Three quarters of Canadians with Alzheimer's disease are women
- Thirty-six per cent of Canadians know someone with Alzheimer's disease
- Researchers predict that in five to seven years there will be treatments to attack the disease process itself, not just the symptoms.

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and symptoms with your employer. Cutting down on your hours and responsibilities may be an option. If you are the owner of an independent business, you will want to start planning for what's ahead. If you have to leave your work altogether, volunteering is a way to keep active and continue participating in activities you enjoy.

Ultimately, people with Alzheimer's are living longer and healthier lives than ever before. By watching for early signs and symptoms, planning for the future from the start and discussing caregiving options, daily life can be less stressful and more enjoyable for everyone.

Living with Alzheimer's disease *continued from cover*

Symptoms to watch for include the following:

1. Memory loss that begins to affect day-to-day function.
2. Familiar tasks becoming difficult.
3. Problems with language.
4. Disorientation in place and time.
5. Poor or decreased judgement.
6. Difficulty with abstract thinking.
7. Misplacing items.
8. Behaviour and mood change.
9. A shift in personality.

10. Trouble taking the initiative.

Experts suggest that keeping a "symptom diary" to record changes in behaviour, mood and health status can help to clarify the need for intervention and assistance. It could also pave the way for a more detailed discussion with healthcare providers. Remember, the sooner the condition is diagnosed, the sooner treatment can begin and the best possible care plans made.

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Attention caregivers

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Other dementias

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, accounting for 64 per cent of all dementias in Canada. Dementia is a syndrome consisting of a number of symptoms that include loss of memory, judgment and reasoning, and changes in mood and behaviour. These symptoms may affect a person's ability to function at work, in social relationships or in day-to-day activities. Sometimes the symptoms of dementia are caused by conditions that may be treatable, such as depression, thyroid disease, infections or drug interactions. If the symptoms are not treatable and progress over time then they may be due to damage to the nerve cells in the brain. A person may sometimes have symptoms such as sudden onset of memory loss, early behaviour changes or difficulties with speech and movement. These symptoms may suggest a dementia other than Alzheimer's disease.

For more information

- www.alzheimer.ca
- www.onmemory.ca
- www.nia.nih.gov
- www.alzheimerontario.org
- www.alzforum.org

Adapted from the information available on the Alzheimer Society of Canada website at www.alzheimer.ca.

Ask our experts

Forward your questions or comments, and we'll ask our experienced nursing team to provide you with the latest advice and information.

Are memory problems an indication of Alzheimer's disease?

Not all memory problems are an indicator of Alzheimer's. There are many more indicators, or warning signs, that your doctor will look at to make a preliminary diagnosis of Alzheimer's. Some of these warning signs include not remembering simple day-to-day activities that were done without thinking in the past, or having disorientation in relation to time and place. Forgetting where you put something and later finding it in an inappropriate place (e.g., putting the milk away in the oven) is another sign.



As a caregiver for a family member with Alzheimer's disease, how can I reduce my stress?

It is very stressful taking care of a family member while also trying to take care of yourself. It is a good idea, though, to find ways to decrease your stress and to get assistance where you can in order to help your family member as much as possible. One of the ways in which you can take care of yourself is to take regular time away from your family member, such as a weekly appointment. Hiring someone to come in and take care of your family member will help tremendously with that. In addition, if there is a day

program nearby that works with people with Alzheimer's you could arrange for your family member to go for a visit. Including other members of the family, such as adult children, in caring for your loved one will also benefit everyone. It allows you some freedom and gives your children an opportunity to spend time with their family member.

Your loved one will be less inclined to be upset at your absence if a family member is spending time with them.

How can I make my home safer and more comfortable for my wife, who has recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's?

A safe and secure home will help to ensure your wife's independence and prevent falls and accidents, and will give you peace of mind as well. Any area rugs should be either picked up or secured down to prevent your wife from tripping. Make sure that the stove is always off when not in use, as your wife may turn it on and forget that she has done so. If she is having any trouble standing in the shower, there are several bath aids that you could use, such as a shower chair or handrails.

Call We Care for your complimentary copy of *The Independent Living Guide*: 1-888-429-3227.

Send your questions to Julia Sommers at julia_sommers@wecare.ca



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