

What is Alzheimer's?

Alzheimer's Disease was first discovered in 1906 by a German doctor named Alois Alzheimer. It is a disorder of the brain, causing damage to brain tissue over a period of time. Alzheimer's accounts for more than half of all organically caused memory loss, and it is the 4th leading cause of death in the aged, following heart disease, cancer, and stroke. At present, there is no known cause or cure. The disease can linger from two to twenty-five years before death results.

Alzheimer's causes a global loss of intellectual abilities, which is severe enough to interfere with daily functioning. Initial symptoms are subtle. **The person may show signs of:**

- personality change,
- memory loss,
- poor judgment,
- have less initiative,
- be unable to learn new things,
- have mood swings or
- become easily agitated.

Gradually, as the disease progresses, **the victim develops:**

- ▶ speech and language problems,
- ▶ movement and coordination difficulties,
- ▶ total confusion and disorientation,
- ▶ will ultimately rely completely on a caregiver for daily functioning.

Although in the early stages of Alzheimer's, the victim may appear completely healthy, the damage is slowly destroying the brain cells. This hidden process **damages the brain in several ways:**

- ❖ patches of brain cells degenerate (neuritic plaques).
- ❖ nerve endings that transmit messages within the brain become tangled (neurofibrillary tangles).
- ❖ there is a reduction in acetylcholine, an important brain chemical.
- : spaces in the brain (ventricles) become larger and filled with a granular fluid.
- ❖ the size and shape of the brain alters. The cortex appears to shrink and decay.

Understandably, as the brain continues to degenerate, there is a comparable loss in mental functioning. Since the brain controls all of our bodily functions, an Alzheimer victim in the later stages will have difficulty walking, talking, swallowing, controlling bladder and bowel functions. They become quite frail and prone to infections such as pneumonia.

To complicate matters further, there are numerous conditions which mimic Alzheimer's disease. Conditions such as: 1. stroke, 2. vascular diseases, 3. toxins, 4. nutritional deficiencies, 5. Infections, etc., can all have symptoms that mimic Alzheimer's.

For this very reason, it is most important that a thorough examination be done in order to rule out any treatable condition.