

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Understanding Alzheimer's Disease

A diagnosis of Alzheimer's can have a devastating effect on friends and family. In fact, the disease is often described as a "family disease" because it can change the lives of many people in a family dramatically.

What is Alzheimer's?

Alzheimer's disease is a degenerative brain condition that gradually affects memory and the ability to reason, learn new things, or make sense of the world.

Most cases (approximately 90 per cent to 95 per cent) are sporadic and have no single, identifiable cause. A smaller number of cases (approximately five to 10 per cent) are thought to have a genetic link. Increasing age (65+) is the highest risk factor for the sporadic forms of the disease. The rarer, inherited forms of the disease can affect individuals at a much younger age.

Although there is no cure for Alzheimer's, the good news is that earlier diagnosis and new medical treatments are helping people affected better cope with the effects of the disease. As well, researchers are making new strides in understanding how the disease works and its various stages of progression.

The Signs of Alzheimer's

Memory abilities change as we grow older, but the signs of Alzheimer's entail much more than this. The disease can manifest itself in many ways. But in most cases, the areas of the brain that are important to memory are affected first. As the disease moves to other areas of the brain and brain cells cease to function, other essential systems are affected.

Signs to watch for include:

- Memory loss and difficulty remembering recently learned information.
- Difficulty with familiar, day-to-day tasks.
- Problems communicating or relaying information.
- Uncertainty of time and place.
- A decline in judgement.
- Misplacing things and frequently putting things in unusual places.
- Personality and behavioral changes, sudden mood swings.
- Loss of interest in normally enjoyed activities.

Keep in mind that many symptoms that look like Alzheimer's can be caused by other treatable conditions. However, if you recognize these signs, it's a good idea to consult a physician. Early detection of Alzheimer's is important to getting the right treatment, care and support.

For more information on caring for someone with Alzheimer’s disease, see “Supporting a Loved One with Alzheimer's Disease.”

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