

Understanding Alzheimer's Disease

By Dorothy L. Tengler

We all lose things once in a while—our keys, our train of thought, our umbrellas. And we occasionally struggle to remember someone's name or an important date. Usually, such memory lapses are harmless, that is, until such forgetfulness begins to undermine our daily existence. As we age, we begin to hear the term dementia to describe problems with memory, speech, and perception. In dementia, it is usually our short-term memory that is affected. We don't remember that cute saying we heard just yesterday, but we remember vividly the events surrounding our first date more than 60 years ago. People with dementia may have trouble finding the right words or may seem to have difficulties understanding exactly what others are saying. In dementia, it is our perception that is affected.

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the most common form of dementia and is the term used to describe a disorder marked by certain brain changes, regardless of the age of onset. But AD is *not* a normal part of aging—it is not something that inevitably happens in later life. Rather, it is one of the dementing disorders, a group of brain diseases that leads to the loss of mental and physical functions. AD is a progressive, incurable illness that affects as many as four million Americans. A very small minority of AD patients is under 50 years of age. Most are over 65.

AD is the exception, rather than the rule, in old age. Only AD or a related dementia afflicts 5 to 6 percent of older people, but this means approximately 3 to 4 million Americans have one of these debilitating disorders. Research indicates that 1 percent of the population aged 65-74 has severe dementia, increasing to 7 percent of those aged 75-84 and to 25 percent of those 85 or older. At least half the people in United States nursing homes have AD or a related disorder. In 1985, the annual cost of caring for individuals with AD and related dementia in institutional and community settings was estimated between \$24 billion and \$48 billion for direct costs alone and is probably higher today. As our population ages, and the number of Alzheimer patients increases, costs of care will rise as well.

Although Alzheimer's disease is not curable or reversible, there are ways to alleviate symptoms and suffering and to assist families. Not every person with this illness must necessarily move to a nursing home. The families in the community care for many thousands of patients—especially those in the early stages of the disease. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of medical management is family education and family support services. When, or whether, to transfer a patient to a nursing home is a decision to be carefully considered by the family.

References

Management of Alzheimer's Disease. In: Goroll, ed. Primary Care Medicine. 3rd ed. Phila., PA: Lippincott-Raven; 865-870.