

WHEN FORGETTING IS NOT NORMAL SIGNS OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

By: Tuck T. Saul, Ph.D.

Alzheimer's disease is a common form of dementia (an absence or reduction of intellectual faculties) that destroys brain cells and currently affects about 4.5 million people in the United States. The Alzheimer's Association reports that medicare costs associated with the treatment and care were \$91 billion in 2005. The financial and emotional costs for the family left to take care of a loved one with Alzheimer's can be overwhelming.

Generally about one in 10 people older than 65 have the disease as well as five in 10 people older than 85, according to the American Medical Association. Researchers classify symptoms into seven different stages of disease progression. The average time it takes for the disease to progress from stage one to stage seven is eight years. The range can be as little as three years or as long as 20 years.

The first stage of Alzheimer's shows no outward signs of the disease. Everything appears normal. In the second stage a person begins to notice having some memory lapses. Often other family members and friends do not consider the complaints of forgetfulness as being abnormal, especially if the person is in their 60's or older. Stage three is the point that Alzheimer's becomes evident to others. Individuals in this stage may misplace items, have some difficulties retrieving words or names, and have difficulties retaining new information, encounter problems organizing or planning and recognizing their work performance declining. In stage four, still considered mild or early-stage Alzheimer's, the person will noticeably lack information about current events, have problems planning and scheduling, and have problems taking care of bills because the person's math skills have diminished. In stage five, the person will not recall their home address and/or telephone number, or be able to recognize their current location. In addition, the person will be unable to do even simple math. In stage six, considered midstage Alzheimer's disease, major personality changes begin to take place. The person also requires assistance in activities of daily living like getting dressed, grooming, and hygiene. However, the person still is able to recognize familiar and unfamiliar faces, though the person may not remember the person's name. In stage seven, considered the late stage of Alzheimer's, the person loses almost all aspects of self-control, including the abilities to walk, eat, control their bodily functions, and speak. Death becomes eminent at this point of the disease.

There is no current cure for Alzheimer's disease and no treatment that will stop the progression of the disease. Some medications have been developed to slow down the progression of the disease if treatment is started in the early to mid-stages. The current medications include Aricept, Exelon and Razadyne, which all boost levels of acetylcholine, a messenger chemical that is lacking in people with Alzheimer's. A new drug called Namenda which is intended to improve glutamate activities (another essential chemical in the brain) has proved to have some effect helping stimulate learning and memory. Namenda is often used in conjunction with the other previously mentioned drugs.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, the primary risk factors for Alzheimer's include being over 65 years of age, family history of Alzheimer's, head trauma, conditions that damage the heart or blood vessels, and activities that increase poor aging like drinking too much, smoking, and being overweight.

Should you be a caretaker of someone who suffers from Alzheimer's, it is imperative that you have ways to address the high level of stress associated with being a caregiver. Often, the caregiver carries guilt about self-care and/or can easily become frustrated and angry about how the person with Alzheimer's is behaving. There is a sense of loss that comes with seeing the same person from the outside and knowing that the person you've known all your life no longer exists. A common and stressful issue that comes with this disease includes identifying when its time for the person to be placed in an assisted living or nursing home facility. This can lead to family conflicts that only add to the caregiver's level of stress. At Saul and Saul, LLC we can lend a hand for the caregiver as well as for the whole family. Individual and family counseling can provide support and guidance. Please keep us in mind.