

To help you know what warning signs to look for, the Alzheimer's Association has developed a checklist of common symptoms (some of them also may apply to other dementing illnesses). Review the list and check the symptoms that concern you. If you make several check marks, the individual with the symptoms should see a physician for a complete examination.

1 RECENT MEMORY LOSS THAT AFFECTS JOB SKILLS

It's normal to occasionally forget assignments, colleagues' names, or a business associate's telephone number and remember them later. Those with a dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease, may forget things more often, and not remember them later.

2 DIFFICULTY PERFORMING FAMILIAR TASKS

Busy people can be so distracted from time to time that they may leave the carrots on the stove and only remember to serve them at the end of the meal. People with Alzheimer's disease could prepare a meal and not only forget to serve it, but also forget they made it.

3 PROBLEMS WITH LANGUAGE

Everyone has trouble finding the right word sometimes, but a person with Alzheimer's disease may forget simple words or substitute inappropriate words, making his or her sentence incomprehensible.

4 DISORIENTATION OF TIME AND PLACE

It's normal to forget the day of the week or your destination for a moment. But people with Alzheimer's disease can become lost on their own street, not knowing where they are, how they got there or how to get back home.

5 POOR OR DECREASED JUDGMENT

People can become so immersed in an activity that they temporarily forget the child they're watching. People with Alzheimer's disease could forget entirely the child under their care. They may also dress inappropriately, wearing several shirts or blouses.

6 PROBLEMS WITH ABSTRACT THINKING

Balancing a checkbook may be disconcerting when the task is more complicated than usual. Someone with Alzheimer's disease could forget completely what the numbers are and what needs to be done with them.

7 MISPLACING THINGS

Anyone can temporarily misplace a wallet or keys. A person with Alzheimer's disease may put things in inappropriate places: an iron in the freezer, or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl.

8 CHANGES IN MOOD OR BEHAVIOR

Everyone becomes sad or moody from time to time. Someone with Alzheimer's disease can exhibit rapid mood swings — from calm to tears to anger — for no apparent reason.

9 CHANGES IN PERSONALITY

People's personalities ordinarily change somewhat with age. But a person with Alzheimer's disease can change drastically, becoming extremely confused, suspicious, or fearful.

10 LOSS OF INITIATIVE

It's normal to tire of housework, business activities, or social obligations, but most people regain their initiative. The person with Alzheimer's disease may become very passive and require cues and prompting to become involved.

This section answers some of the most frequently asked questions about Alzheimer's disease.

Q: What is Alzheimer's disease?

A: Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, degenerative disease of the brain in which brain cells die and are not replaced. It results in impaired memory, thinking, and behavior, and is the most common form of dementing illness.

Q: What are other causes of Alzheimer-like symptoms?

A: Depression, nutritional deficiencies, drug interaction or intoxication, and thyroid imbalances can cause symptoms similar to those related to Alzheimer's disease, and sometimes these symptoms are reversible with a physician's care. Symptoms are also found with dementias associated with stroke, Huntington's disease, Parkinson's disease, Pick's disease, and AIDS.

Q: How prevalent is the disease?

A: An estimated 4 million Americans are afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. It is the fourth leading cause of death among American adults. Because the population is aging, an estimated 14 million will have the disease by the year 2050.

Q: Who is afflicted with Alzheimer's disease?

A: Ten percent of those over 65, and almost

Your wife always misplaces her keys. But last Tuesday, she couldn't remember what they were for.

Your grandfather likes to take daily strolls around the neighborhood. But four times in the past month he's gotten lost and couldn't find his way home without help from a neighbor.

Your favorite uncle can't remember your name or the names of your husband or children.

The memory loss, confusion, and disorientation described in these examples are symptoms of dementing illness. The most common dementing illness is Alzheimer's disease.

Unfortunately, many people fail to recognize that these symptoms indicate something is wrong. They may mistakenly assume that such behavior is a normal part of the aging process; it isn't. Or, symptoms may develop gradually and go unnoticed for a long time. Sometimes people refuse to act even when they know something's wrong.

It's important to see a physician when you recognize these symptoms. Only a physician can properly diagnose the person's condition, and sometimes symptoms are reversible. Even if the diagnosis is Alzheimer's disease, help is available to learn how to care for a person with dementia and where to find assistance for yourself, the caregiver.

THE FIRST STEP, THOUGH, IS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE.