

# Alzheimer's Disease

## Introduction

Alzheimer's disease is a **progressive neurological disease** in which brain cells slowly die over time, causing a person to gradually lose their memory, thinking ability, and capacity to perform daily tasks. It is the **most common cause of dementia**, accounting for 60-80% of all dementia cases. It mainly affects people above **65 years of age** and gets worse over time. There is currently **no cure** for Alzheimer's disease.

The name comes from German doctor **Dr. Alois Alzheimer**, who first described the disease in 1906.

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## What Happens in the Brain?

In Alzheimer's disease, two abnormal substances build up in the brain:

- **Amyloid Plaques** — these are clumps of protein that form between brain cells and block communication between them
- **Tau Tangles** — these are twisted protein fibers that damage and kill brain cells from the inside

As more and more brain cells die, the brain shrinks and the person loses the ability to think, remember, and function normally.

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## Stages and Symptoms

Alzheimer's disease progresses through three main stages:

### Stage 1 — Early (Mild) Stage

This is the beginning stage where changes are small and easy to miss:

- Forgetting recent events or conversations
- Forgetting names of familiar people or objects
- Losing things frequently
- Difficulty in planning or making decisions
- Mild mood changes like becoming quiet or withdrawn

**Example:** An elderly man forgets where he kept his glasses or cannot remember what he ate for breakfast, even though he can clearly remember events from 30 years ago.

## Stage 2 — Middle (Moderate) Stage

This is the longest stage and symptoms become more serious:

- Difficulty recognizing close family members
- Getting lost in familiar places
- Confusion about time, date, and place
- Difficulty speaking and finding the right words
- Needing help with daily activities like bathing, dressing, and cooking
- Personality changes — becoming aggressive, suspicious, or anxious
- Wandering away from home

**Example:** An elderly woman who was an excellent cook can no longer remember how to make simple food. She sometimes does not recognize her own daughter.

## Stage 3 — Late (Severe) Stage

In this final stage, the person becomes completely dependent on others:

- Loss of ability to speak or communicate
- Unable to recognize anyone including spouse or children
- Cannot walk, sit, or swallow properly
- Complete loss of bladder and bowel control
- Highly vulnerable to infections like pneumonia

**Example:** An elderly man in the late stage of Alzheimer's lies in bed all day, does not respond when spoken to, and needs to be fed and cleaned by caregivers.

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## Risk Factors

The following factors increase the risk of Alzheimer's disease:

- **Age** — the biggest risk factor; risk doubles every 5 years after age 65
- **Family history and genetics** — if a close family member had Alzheimer's, the risk is higher
- **Gender** — women are more likely to develop Alzheimer's than men
- **Head injuries** — serious head trauma in earlier life increases risk
- **Lifestyle factors** — lack of exercise, poor diet, smoking, and social isolation increase risk
- **Other health conditions** — high blood pressure, diabetes, and depression are linked to higher risk

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## Impact on the Family and Caregivers

Alzheimer's disease does not only affect the patient — it deeply affects the entire family:

- Family members, especially women, take on the role of full-time caregivers
- Caregiving is physically tiring and emotionally draining
- It can lead to **caregiver burnout** — exhaustion, depression, and anxiety in the caregiver
- Financial burden increases as the disease progresses and the person needs constant care
- Family relationships can become strained

This is why **caregiver support** is an important part of social work intervention with Alzheimer's patients.

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## Treatment and Management

There is **no cure** for Alzheimer's disease, but the following can help:

- **Medicines** — certain drugs can slow down memory loss temporarily and manage symptoms like agitation and sleep problems
  - **Cognitive Stimulation** — activities like puzzles, music, storytelling, and reminiscence therapy help keep the brain active in early stages
  - **Structured daily routine** — a regular, predictable schedule reduces confusion and anxiety
  - **Safe environment** — removing hazards at home, labeling rooms, and installing locks to prevent wandering
  - **Emotional and social support** — maintaining social connections and providing love and familiar company helps the person feel safe
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## Role of Social Worker

Social workers play a very important role in supporting Alzheimer's patients and their families:

- Conducting **psychosocial assessments** to understand the person's needs
  - Providing **counseling** to the patient (in early stages) and to the family
  - Connecting families to **day care centres and memory clinics**
  - Training caregivers on how to handle difficult behaviors calmly
  - Organizing **caregiver support groups** so families don't feel alone
  - Advocating for the rights and dignity of the patient
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## Conclusion

Alzheimer's disease is one of the most challenging conditions of old age — it slowly takes away a person's identity, memory, and independence. It affects not just the individual but the entire family. While there is no cure, early diagnosis, proper care, cognitive stimulation, and strong family and social support can significantly improve

the quality of life of the person. Social workers, doctors, and families must work together to ensure that Alzheimer's patients are treated with **dignity, patience, and compassion.**