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Alzheimer's Disease and Other Forms of Dementia

Most people approaching retirement look forward to exploring new pursuits and basking in memories of their long and eventful lives. But for thousands of Canadians, Alzheimer's disease replaces the richness of the golden years with a sense of loss and confusion as memories of the past and present gradually fade.

Although memory loss is common among the elderly, Alzheimer's disease is *not* part of normal aging, according to the Alzheimer Society of British Columbia. It is a progressive neurological disease that affects the brain and many of its functions including language, intellect and spatial orientation.

"In fact, most older people make it through to a ripe old age with no sign of Alzheimer's," says Kern Windwraith of the Alzheimer Society of BC.

The illness develops so gradually that it is hard to notice at first. The symptoms resemble ordinary memory lapses. As the lapses become more frequent, people with Alzheimer's lose the ability to learn and remember anything new. At first they forget things from week to week, then from day to day, and gradually, from hour to hour and even minute to minute.

Eventually people with Alzheimer's disease can no longer remember the names of family and friends or find their way around in places that are not completely familiar. They may avoid social contacts because they can't follow the drift of a conversation. At this stage, many people can still live well using simple routines in a familiar environment. But they may experience a sense of powerlessness and frustration that can lead to emotional turmoil.

For example, when they are upset by an otherwise trivial event, a person with Alzheimer's may break into tears, strike out in anger or try to run away. They sometimes become suspicious and develop delusions, talking to imaginary persons or accusing family members of being



impostors.

"There is a feeling of horror when you are losing your independence and realize you need to depend on others for your most basic needs," Windwraith says. The emotional turmoil affects people at different stages, she adds. "For a spouse, Alzheimer's means losing your life partner right before your eyes."

In later stages of the disease, people with this illness do not recognize the faces of their closest relatives. They may have trouble dressing or feeding themselves because they are unable to hold a thought long enough to form a goal. Often, people with Alzheimer's pace in an agitated way or wander aimlessly. Life skills are lost in more or less the reverse order they are learned in childhood, starting with handling

Rates of Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia

- in Canada, 435,000 people aged 65 and over have dementia, with Alzheimer's disease representing about two-thirds of all dementia cases
- by 2031, this number is expected to increase to over 750,000
- in BC, over 60,000 people have dementia, and over 40,000 have Alzheimer's disease
- at least one in 13 people aged 65 or older have Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia
- the rates of Alzheimer's increase with age:
 - 2% of people aged 65 to 74
 - 11% of people aged 75 to 84
 - 33% of people aged 85 and older

Source: Alzheimer Society of Canada



money, choosing clothes, bathing and using the toilet, feeding one's self, talking, walking and even sitting up. As the disease progresses, they lose control of their bowels and bladders and have increasing difficulty sleeping.

Once the brain loses the capacity to regulate elementary body functions, people with Alzheimer's die of malnutrition, dehydration, infection or heart failure. The interval between the earliest symptoms varies from person to person but usually spans three to 20 years, with an average of eight to 12.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of a group of degenerative brain diseases known as dementia. Other forms include Pick's disease, Creutzfeldt Jakob disease, Lewy body dementia, vascular dementia and primary progressive aphasia, among others. Although these illnesses affect other parts of the brain, most of the symptoms resemble those of Alzheimer's disease, says Windwraith of the Alzheimer Society.

Alzheimer's disease and related dementia cannot be cured, reversed or stopped in their progression. Today's treatments, which

Help for Individuals with Dementia and their Families

The Alzheimer Society offers support services and provides information on treatments and care strategies:

- **support groups**, telephone or peer counselors can provide emotional support
- **relief programs** provide short-term respite for caregivers, day programs; overnight or vacation programs can provide a needed break
- **homecare workers** provide personal care to individuals at home, assisting with eating, dressing and bathing as well as light household tasks
- **housekeeping services** can help with cleaning, shopping, laundry and meal preparation
- **skilled nursing services** provide trained professionals in the home
- **Meals on Wheels** offers home-delivered meals for well-balanced lunches and dinners

Top 10 Warning Signs

Remember that it's normal to occasionally forget appointments, someone's name, or where you put your glasses. But if you notice some of the signs below interfering with daily life, talk to your doctor.

- Memory loss (particularly of recent events) that affects day-to-day function
- Difficulty performing familiar tasks
- Problems with language, such as forgetting simple words or substituting words
- Disorientation of time and place (for longer than a moment)
- Poor or decreased judgment
- Problems with abstract thinking
- Misplacing things, particularly in inappropriate places
- Changes in mood and behaviour
- Changes in personality including confusion, withdrawal, fearfulness
- Loss of initiative

Source: Alzheimer Society of Canada

may include medications, are designed to reduce the symptoms and help both the patient and the family live through the course of the illness with greater dignity and less discomfort. "Alzheimer's not only affects the person with the disease, it affects the whole family," Windwraith explains. In fact, family members and friends are the main source of care for individuals with Alzheimer's disease who live in the community. Caregiving can take immense tolls on caregivers' physical and mental health.

Individuals with Alzheimer's and their families are encouraged to seek help from support groups, counsellors and community services which are available throughout BC. Many families qualify for government subsidies that help cover the expense of caring for a relative with Alzheimer's. Some organizations including the Alzheimer Society of BC offer support services for individuals with Alzheimer's at no charge, Windwraith adds.

SOURCES

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See our website for up-to-date links.

Partners:

Anxiety Disorders Association of British Columbia

British Columbia Schizophrenia Society

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

Centre for Addictions Research of BC

FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health Care

Jessie's Hope Society

Mood Disorders Association of BC

For more information call the Mental Health Information Line toll-free in BC at 1-800-661-2121

or email bcpartners@heretohelp.bc.ca

web: heretohelp.bc.ca