



Mental Health America of Franklin County

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Alzheimer's Disease

What is Alzheimer's?

Alzheimer's Disease (AD) is the most common cause of dementia in older people. A dementia is a medical condition that disrupts the way the brain works. AD affects the parts of the brain that control thought, memory, and language. Although the risk of getting the disease increases with age, it is not a normal part of aging. At present, the cause of the disease is unknown and there is no cure.

AD is named after Dr. Aloes Alzheimer, a German psychiatrist. In 1906, Dr. Alzheimer described changes in the brain tissue of a woman who had died of an unusual mental illness. He found abnormal deposits (now called senile or neuritic plaques) and tangled bundles of nerve fibers (now called neurofibrillary tangles). These plaques and tangles in the brain have come to be characteristic brain changes due to AD.

Symptoms Include:

- Initial mild forgetfulness
- Confusion with names and simple mathematical problems
- Forgetfulness to do simple everyday tasks, i.e., brushing their teeth
- Problems speaking, understanding, reading, and writing
- Behavioral and personality changes
- Aggressive, anxious, or aimless behavior

Statistics

It is estimated that currently 4 million people in the United States may have Alzheimer's disease. The disease usually begins after age 65 and risk of AD goes up with age. While younger people may have AD, it is much less common. About 3% of men and women ages 65-74 have AD and nearly half of those over age 85 could have the disease.

Diagnosis

No definitive test to diagnose Alzheimer's disease in living patients exists. However, in specialized research facilities, neurologists now can diagnose AD with up to 90% accuracy. The following is some of the information used to make this diagnosis:

- A complete medical history
- Basic medical tests (i.e., blood, urine tests)

- Neuropsychological tests (i.e., memory, problem-solving, language tests)
- Brain scans (i.e., MRI scan, CT scan or PET scan)

Research for Possible Risk Factors

Scientists are trying to learn what causes AD and how to prevent it. This list may not be all-inclusive or definite. However, research has lead scientists to consider these as possible risk factors:

- Genetic factors
- Environmental factors - aluminum, zinc, and other metals have been detected in the brain tissue of those with AD. However, it isn't known whether they cause AD, or build up in the brain as a result of AD.
- Viruses - Viruses that might cause the changes seen in the brain tissue of AD patients are being studied.

The only known risk factors are age and family history. Serious head injury and lower levels of education may also be risk factors. AD is probably not caused by any one factor. Most likely, it is several factors together that react differently in each person. Unfortunately, no blood or urine test currently exists that can detect or predict AD.

Treatment

Alzheimer's disease advances in stages, ranging from mild forgetfulness to severe dementia. The course of the disease and the rate of decline vary from person to person. The duration from onset of symptoms to death can be from 5 to 20 years.

- Currently, there is no effective treatment for AD that can halt the progression. However, some experimental drugs have shown promise in easing symptoms in some patients. Medications can help control behavioral symptoms; making patients more comfortable and easier to manage for caregivers. Still other research efforts focus on alternative care programs that provide relief to the caregiver and support for the patient.

Mental Health America of Franklin County is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We help people navigate the mental health system. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; free support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; Pro Bono Counseling Program where underinsured and uninsured individuals can receive free counseling; community and professional mental health education including Get Connected; maternal mental health support and advocacy (POEM); and a quarterly newsletter featuring legislative updates and new happenings at MHAFC. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board, United Way of Central Ohio, individuals, foundations, and corporations. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at www.mhafc.org.