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Alzheimers Disease Has Far-Reaching Effects

Imagine the heartbreak of living with someone you love, yet that person does not even know who you are. Family members of an estimated 4 million people in the United States (20 million throughout the world) face this situation every day, and that number is expected to grow to over 14 million in the next 50 years. Their loved ones suffer from Alzheimers disease.

Alzheimers disease is a disorder of the brain that occurs when nerve cells die, so the brain's signals cannot be properly transmitted. Although a definite diagnosis of Alzheimers can only be made following a thorough examination of the brain once the person dies, such a diagnosis is presumed after a lengthy investigation to rule out other diseases is performed. It is a progressive disease, beginning with mild forgetfulness that advances to total dependence on other people for everyday care. Alzheimers has a tremendous impact on the individual, the caregivers, and society as a whole. The economic burden is estimated to be as much as \$100 billion annually in both direct and indirect costs, and will increase as the population ages. Additionally, spouses, relatives, and friends experience serious physical, emotional and financial stress throughout their years of care giving.

Three types of Alzheimers disease are recognized. *Early onset Alzheimers* occurs in people under the age of 65, and accounts for only 10% of all Alzheimers cases. It appears to be linked to a genetic defect. The most common form of Alzheimers disease is *late-onset Alzheimers*.

It usually occurs after age 65; 20% of Americans between the ages of 75 and 84 have Alzheimers, and it affects nearly 50% of people over age 85. The third type of Alzheimers is called *Familial Alzheimers disease*, which is entirely inherited and extremely rare, affecting less than 5% of all Alzheimers cases.

The common symptoms of this condition include disorientation and confusion, a tendency to misplace things, difficulty with abstract thinking, trouble performing routine tasks, changes in personality and behavior, decreased judgment, communication problems, loss of motivation, impaired spatial abilities, changes in sleep patterns, and difficulty following directions. These symptoms typically occur in stages as the disease progresses.

- Stage One: The condition is mild, and the changes may be almost imperceptible. The person becomes increasingly forgetful, begins to lose interest in previously favorite activities, and may dress inappropriately or incompletely. At this stage, most individuals are aware of their diminishing capacity and know what lies ahead. This leads to feelings of fear, grief, anger, and hostility.
- Stage Two: This stage is usually the longest in duration; the person begins to wander and gets lost, has difficulty recognizing family and friends, forgets to do routine tasks, and may suffer from delusions and insomnia. The individual becomes less able to deal with his or her feelings, and may become suspicious or even paranoid.
- Stage Three: Although the person no longer recognizes family and friends, cannot remember anything, and cannot use language, he or she can respond to music, touch, and eye contact. The ability to bathe and groom oneself is lost, eating and swallowing is difficult, and incontinence sets in. The person is bedridden and totally dependent on others.

The average person with Alzheimers disease lives 8 to 10 years after being diagnosed, but some people live for 20 years with this condition. During the third stage of the disease, the person becomes so debilitated that other

infections and illnesses develop. The most common cause of death for Alzheimers victims is pneumonia.

There is no cure for Alzheimers, but it may be possible to prevent or delay the onset of this condition. Recent research suggests that participation in cognitive stimulation is associated with a reduced risk of developing the disease. Daily activities such as reading, doing crossword puzzles, playing cards, and visiting museums help keep the mind in shape and reduce memory loss. Physical activity, good nutrition, and social interaction also help to maintain functioning in people with Alzheimers. In addition, there are a number of promising drugs on the market and currently being developed that successfully reduce the severity of many of Alzheimer's symptoms.

If someone in your family has been diagnosed with Alzheimers disease, you can help to reduce their confusion by taking a number of steps.

1. Minimize changes in surroundings and routine. Necessary changes should be made gradually.
2. Avoid situations that require the person with Alzheimers to make decisions.
3. Frequently remind the person of the day, time, place, etc, and remind him or her of the names of others in their lives.
4. Place large labels on drawers and shelves, with words or pictures.
5. Make sure your statements and requests are stated simply.
6. Monitor medications so they are taken properly and on time.
7. Provide nutritious meals and opportunity for social and cognitive activities and exercise.
8. When going out, take the person to places that are familiar and not crowded.
9. Be patient and supportive.

For additional information about Alzheimers disease, contact the Alzheimer's Association at 1-800-272-3900 (www.alz.org), go to the Vidya Medical Services link at www.vidya.com, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at www.mentalhealth.org. Further information about Alzheimer's disease or other health topics is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org.)