Health Basics

Alzheimer’s Disease

What is Alzheimer’s disease?

This progressive illness affects parts of the brain that control thought, memory and language and is the most common type of dementia. Alzheimer’s can begin with mild memory loss that may lead to an individual’s inability to converse and react to the environment and can interfere with his or her ability to handle routine daily tasks.

What are the symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease?

Some typical signs of Alzheimer’s include the following:

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life, especially forgetting recently learned information or important dates or events
- Changes in the ability to follow a plan or solve problems
- Difficulty completing familiar chores, duties or work
- Losing track of time, dates and places, resulting in confusion and uncertainty
- Trouble reading, understanding visual images and judging distance
- Problems speaking, repetitiveness during conversations and struggling with words
- Misplacing objects and being unable to backtrack to find them
- Poor judgment and decision making and changes in mood and personality or inappropriate behavior
- Withdrawing from work or social activities that were previously enjoyable or routine.

What are the risk factors for Alzheimer’s disease?

According to scientists, the greatest known risk factor for Alzheimer’s is advancing age, as most individuals with the disease are age 65 or older. In addition, after age 85, the risk of someone developing the illness jumps to almost 50 percent. Other strong risk factors include family history and heredity. Also, scientists have uncovered some risk factors linked to Alzheimer’s that people can control, such as serious and repetitive head injuries and suffering damages to the heart or blood vessels from high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, diabetes and elevated cholesterol

levels.

How is Alzheimer’s disease diagnosed?

Alzheimer’s is diagnosed via a thorough medical assessment that includes an evaluation of an individual’s physical and mental status, a neurological exam and special testing, including brain imaging, to exclude other possible causes of dementia symptoms.

How is Alzheimer’s disease treated?

Currently, there’s no cure for Alzheimer’s, but while researchers search for a solution, doctors can prescribe medications and nondrug treatments for those affected. The Food and Drug Administration has approved five drugs to treat the symptoms of Alzheimer’s at different stages of the disease: donepezil (Aricept), galantamine (Razdyne), memantine (Namenda), rivastigmine (Exelon) and a combination of donepezil and memantine (Namzaric). These drugs work to preserve the communication function of nerve cells, or neurons, in the brain.

Nondrug therapies focus on helping those living with Alzheimer’s to maintain mental function, manage behavioral symptoms and slow the disease’s progression in order to help individuals remain independent longer.

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