

facts about alzheimer's disease



Alzheimer's disease (pronounced AHLZ-hi-merz) is a progressive degenerative disease that destroys cells in the brain. The disease is the leading cause of dementia, a condition that involves gradual memory loss, decline in the ability to perform routine tasks, disorientation, difficulty in learning, loss of language skills, impaired judgment, and personality changes. As the disease progresses, people with Alzheimer's disease become unable to care for themselves. The loss of brain cells eventually leads to the failure of other systems in the body; the rate of progression varies from person to person. The time from

what we know about alzheimer's disease

Dr. Alois Alzheimer, a German physician, first described the disease in 1906. He observed in the autopsy of a woman with dementia two kinds of abnormal structures in the brain that are now recognized as hallmarks of the disease, amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles. Since then, researchers have learned much about how these structures form, but they do not know exactly what role each structure plays in the loss of brain cells.

Studies have shown that the greatest known risk for developing Alzheimer's is increasing age. As many as 10 percent of people 65 years of age and older have Alzheimer's, and nearly 50 percent of people 85 and older have the disease. A family history of the disease is another known risk. Having a parent or a sibling with the disease increases the individual's chances of developing the disease.

Scientists have identified three genes that cause rare, inherited forms of the disease that tend to occur before the age of 65. Through research they have found one gene that raises the risk of developing the most common form, Alzheimer's disease that affects the older person over the age of 65. Research is moving at the fastest rate in history for the cause of Alzheimer's disease.

how alzheimer's disease is diagnosed

There is no single test to detect Alzheimer's disease. A diagnosis is based on a thorough evaluation of symptoms and assessment of the person's health. A physician will use a variety of tests to assess memory and skills. A family member is asked about any changes that they have seen in their memory or behavior. A physician will also do a thorough exam, review the person's medical history, order various lab tests that may require blood or urine samples or brain imaging. All of this information will help the physician identify the probable cause of the symptoms and rule out any reversible conditions that may cause the memory problems or the dementia symptoms, such as depression, adverse drug interactions, or nutritional deficiencies.

treatments that are available

There are currently five drugs approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that are being used to treat Alzheimer's disease symptoms— Aricept, Exelon, Razadine and Namenda. About half of the people that are taking the medications do show modest temporary improvement in memory and thinking skills. Vitamin E is prescribed, because it may inhibit molecular activity that slows down the brain cell damage. Other medications are used to treat the symptoms of agitation, anxiety, and depression.

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