

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE AND SENILITY

Alzheimer's disease is a condition that causes progressive deterioration of brain functions. Symptoms include the gradual loss of memory, reason, language and the ability to care for oneself. In order to understand what Alzheimer's disease is and is not, it is important to get some terms straight. A number of different factors can contribute to the development of "dementia". Dementia means a loss of mental functioning. Alzheimer's disease is only **one type of dementia**. It is, however, the most common cause of dementia. **Dementia and Alzheimer's disease are not the same as "senility"**. Senility is really just the term used to refer to the mild slowing down of mental functioning, decreased memory and reduced concentration that happens to most of us as we get older.

The diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease is based on:

- a thorough medical examination
- mental function testing
- a thorough personal and family history
- the exclusion of other possibilities (such as hypothyroidism, vitamin B deficiency, depression, a head injury, a brain tumor or bleeding in the brain)
- an EEG which may show slowed brain waves
- a CT scan which may show a reduction in size of the cerebrum
- a brain biopsy (in some cases)

Often a definite diagnosis of Alzheimer's is not made until after death. The cause of Alzheimer's disease is not clear. While extensive research into Alzheimer's disease is underway, at the present time we have no effective ways to prevent or treat the disease. The goals for caring for someone with Alzheimer's are:

- to help minimize and control symptoms
- provide supportive care
- prevent injury to the person with Alzheimer's or others

In the early stages of the disease, people suffering from Alzheimer's can often be cared for at home with appropriate support and monitoring. As mental functioning deteriorates, however, reasoning and memory become impaired to the point where it is not safe to leave the person unattended. In situations such as these, the day-to-day care of someone with Alzheimer's can take a tremendous physical and emotional toll on caregivers.

The following suggestions may prove helpful to you in the care of a loved one with Alzheimer's disease:

- When a loved one is diagnosed with Alzheimer's, families typically feel helpless and confused. It is often helpful to gather as much information as possible about Alzheimer's disease and the care of someone who has Alzheimer's disease. Talk with the health care professionals involved in the care of your loved one, social workers and community agencies to investigate all of your options.
- Encourage the person to do as much as possible for as long as possible. Eventually, this may include even the basic things like dressing, eating, bathing and using the bathroom.
- Develop a daily routine for the person and stick to this routine as much as possible. This tends to reduce periods of confusion and agitation. Try to prepare the person ahead of time if new elements are being added into the routine (e.g. a trip to the doctor's office or an unfamiliar person coming to visit).
- **Be prepared to "go with the flow"** - a person with Alzheimer's can change from day-to-day, hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute. There will be "good days" and "bad days". They may be clear headed and cheerful in the morning, but confused, agitated and hostile by lunch time - as a caregiver, this can make planning for things very difficult.

- Take steps to ensure that you have someone else who can provide care in case you need to **attend to some of your needs**, but the person with Alzheimer's requires a great deal of attention. **DO NOT just keep putting your needs on hold**. Rotate caregiving among several family members, or speak to community service agencies about other options for caregivers. **Don't expect to be perfect. Forgive yourself for being human**. Take some time off! - look into options for respite care (care for your loved one while you take a break).

Contact the health region for more information and support.

- Don't take incidents of verbal or physical abuse personally. Remind yourself that Alzheimer's sufferers are not in control of their actions. This does not mean, however, that you should leave yourself open to abuse. Particularly in the case of physical abuse, but also in the case of verbal abuse, if your physical or emotional health is at risk, take steps to find a way for the person to be cared for that doesn't involve a risk to you.
- Modify your home to make it more difficult for the person with Alzheimer's to wander off on their own.
- Make sure that you can get proper rest. If the person with Alzheimer's is up all night, make sure that you have night-time supervision for the person so that you can rest. Cat naps during the day are not enough sleep to maintain your health!
- Have an ID bracelet made with name, phone number, and the inscription "memory impaired" on it. This will help everyone involved if the person with Alzheimer's wanders off.
- Don't keep the Alzheimer's a secret, especially if the person with Alzheimer's tends to wander. Neighbors can prove very helpful by alerting you early.
- Continue to try to communicate with Alzheimer's sufferers. It often doesn't seem like it matters, because they may not remember from one minute to the next. But in a world that is lived as a series of moments rather than a continuum, it is still important to feel loved and connected. You can make a difference in those brief moments of their lives.
- Maintain your sense of humor! Savor the moments of tenderness and the moments of laughter ...
- Help the person with Alzheimer's to maintain good nutrition by providing them with a balanced diet based on Canada's Food Guide.
- The use of alcohol for a person with Alzheimer's is discouraged as it can contribute to confusion, agitation and aggression.
- Regular exercise activities such as walking can help the person with Alzheimer's with relaxation and decrease restlessness.

Services Available in Calgary

Community Care Access — Alberta Health Services, Calgary Region

Community Care Access helps individuals identify their health needs while providing information and referral to the Home Care program and other community health services. Home Care services include:

- nursing and rehabilitation services in the home
- personal care services and adult day support programs
- respite and access to care centres
- Designated Assisted Living (DAL) or Calgary Region-funded group homes
- community resources

Anyone can phone Community Care Access for information or to make a referral. In addition to Home Care referrals, Community Care Access is the single point of entry for care centres, DAL, Personal Care Homes (PCH) and Comprehensive Community Care programs.

Phone: 403-943-1920 Website: www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/transition/comm_care.htm

Access Mental Health — Adult & Senior Services

Access Mental Health is a central intake point for non-emergent access to mental health services in the Calgary Region. It also acts as a centralized mental health information source for the Calgary Region. Phone: 403-943-1500 and press 2. Interpretation is available, just say “I speak Korean” when the operator answers. Website: www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/mh/sites/access/index.htm

HealthLink Alberta

24-hour nurse advice and health information telephone line at 1-866-408-LINK (5465) toll-free and press 2. It is a free service with a free interpretation service. Just say “I speak Korean” when the nurse answers, and you will be on hold for few minutes before an interpreter comes on the line.

Alzheimer Society of Calgary

The Alzheimer Society offers a broad range of support services and resources for people living with dementia and for their caregivers. They offer education and training programs, family support groups, safely home wandering registry and resources. 201, 22 58 Ave SW Calgary, AB, T2H 2S3, Phone 403-290-0110, website: www.alzheimercalgary.com

Sources: Healthlink website www.healthlinkalberta.ca

Alzheimer’s disease and senility, Health Information, Alberta Health Services

For previous ‘Road to Healthy Living’ series articles and health information in your own language, please visit www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/diversity/multilingual_health_services.htm