

SEEING THE DOCTOR

How is Alzheimer's disease diagnosed

Right now, there is no single test that can be used to diagnose Alzheimer's disease. Instead a combination of several tests and exams are used.

When you bring someone in to be checked for Alzheimer's:

Give the doctor as much information as you can about the patient's medical history.

Tell the doctor about any illnesses or operations your loved one has had.

Give a list of medicines your loved one takes, and any allergies he or she may have

The doctor will then:

- Do a physical exam and order some blood tests.
- Do a neurological exam, which means a test of how well he or she can remember things, follow directions, and do other thinking skills

In some cases the doctor may:

- Suggest your loved one see a psychologist or psychiatrist to see if he or she has depression or another mental health problem.
- Order a CT Scan or an MRI. These tests do not hurt and they show a computerized picture of the brain.

Here is how you can make the most out of the doctor's visit:

- First, bring a list of things you have noticed to the doctor's office.
- Write down or remember all the symptoms you have been seeing in your loved one to share with the doctor. List times when your loved one has been confused, forgetful, or having trouble following conversations.

Your list will help the doctor decide if your loved one has Alzheimer's disease or some other health problem. The doctor will want to rule out other problems first because the symptoms I have talked about do not always point to Alzheimer's disease. For example, symptoms that look like Alzheimer's might actually be caused by problems with the medicines that a person is already taking. For instance, he or she may be taking the wrong doses or the wrong mixes of medicines. And sometimes a poor diet, being depressed or having other mental health problems can look like Alzheimer's.

These medical conditions can be helped. Yet, seeing a doctor *now* is needed. If your loved one does have Alzheimer's you want to know as soon as possible.

Why should you get a diagnosis for your family member sooner rather than later?

My friends, I know that it can be very hard to even think about going to the doctor to find out if someone you love has Alzheimer's. You are not alone in your feelings. Families often say they just were not ready to face the possibility that a family member or friend may have the disease.

However, keep in mind that there are good reasons to finding out early. First, there are some medicines that can help some people in the early stages with some symptoms such as memory loss. Now the medicines will not work forever and eventually the person will get worse. But, getting on the right medicines in the early stages of the disease can be very helpful for some period of time.

Another very important reason to get the diagnosis as soon as possible is to allow the person with Alzheimer's and family members to make plans for future care. We'll talk about legal and financial plans later in the web site. But now, I want to offer you information on how Alzheimer's is treated once diagnosed.

Making needed phone calls

I am sorry to say that right now there is no way to prevent or cure Alzheimer's disease. This must be very sad news for you to hear. Yet there are two important things you can do

Call the doctor:

First, make an appointment to talk to your loved one's doctor to determine the best treatment. The doctor may suggest going to a neurologist or other specialists. Often, it takes several doctors and other health specialists to confirm a person has Alzheimer's.

Next, call the insurance company

Then, once Alzheimer's is diagnosed, make a call to the insurance company to find out if the patient is covered and how much they will pay toward any needed medicines.

Remember, medicines to help memory and thinking problems will help for a while. Some other medicines can even help with mood and behavior problems that come along with the disease.

Be sure to ask for a list of services you can get for your family member with Alzheimer's.

Special programs can help diagnose Alzheimer's disease

There are also programs that specialize in diagnosing Alzheimer's disease. Click on the bullet below to find the right place to go.

Sometimes these special programs are in hospitals that have Geriatric Centers that specialize in older people's health. Other times these programs are in Memory clinics or Departments of neurology or psychiatry

Does the person you want to have checked for Alzheimer's only speak Spanish? If so, call the special program **before** your appointment and ask for a Spanish interpreter.