



## ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE FACT SHEET

### DEFINITION AND SCOPE:

Alzheimer's Disease (pronounced Altz-hi-merz) is a progressive, degenerative disease that attacks the brain and results in impaired memory, thinking and behavior. It affects an estimated 4 million American adults. It is the most common form of dementing illness. More than 100,000 die of Alzheimer's Disease annually, which makes it the fourth leading cause of death in adults, after heart disease, cancer and stroke.

The disease, first described by Alois Alzheimer in 1907, knows no social or economic boundaries and affects men and women almost equally. Most victims are over 65; however, Alzheimer's Disease can strike in the 40s and 50s. Most Alzheimer's Disease victims are cared for at home, although many persons in nursing homes have dementia. Alzheimer's Disease is devastating for both victims and their families and has been called "the disease of the century."

### SYMPTOMS:

Symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease include a gradual memory loss, decline in ability to perform routine tasks, impairment of judgement, disorientation, personality change, difficulty in learning, and loss of language skills. There is a variation in the rate of change from person to person. The disease eventually renders its victims totally incapable of caring for themselves.

### CAUSE(S) AND RESEARCH:

The cause of Alzheimer's Disease is not known and is currently receiving intensive scientific investigation. Suspected causes include a genetic predisposition, a slow virus or other infectious agents, environmental toxins, and immunologic changes. Other factors also are under investigation.

Scientists are applying the newest knowledge and research techniques in molecular genetics, pathology, virology, immunology, toxicology, neurology, psychiatry, pharmacology, biochemistry and epidemiology to find the cause, treatment, and cure for Alzheimer's Disease and related disorders.

### DIAGNOSIS:

There is no single clinical test to identify Alzheimer's Disease. Before diagnosis of the disease is made, other conditions must be excluded. These include potentially reversible conditions such as depression, adverse drug reactions, metabolic changes, nutritional deficiencies, head injuries and stroke.

Each person with possible Alzheimer's Disease symptoms should have a thorough evaluation. The evaluation should include a complete health history, thorough physical examination, neurological and mental status assessments, and diagnostic tests including blood studies, urinalysis, electrocardiogram and chest x-rays. Other studies often recommended include: computerized tomography (CT Scan), electroencephalography (EEG), removal from medication, formal psychiatric assessment, neuropsychological testing, and occasionally, examination of the cerebrospinal fluid by spinal tap. While this evaluation may provide a clinical diagnosis, confirmation of Alzheimer's Disease requires examination of brain tissue, which is usually performed at autopsy.

### TREATMENT:

Although no cure for Alzheimer's Disease is available at present, good planning and medical and social management can ease the burdens on the patient and family. Appropriate medication can lessen agitation, anxiety and unpredictable behavior, improve sleeping patterns and treat depression. Physical exercise and social activity are important, as are proper nutrition and health maintenance. A calm and well-structured environment may help the afflicted person to maintain as much comfort and dignity as possible.

## ECONOMIC IMPACT:

The course of the disease usually runs from two to 10 years, but it can take as long as 20 years. During the later stages of the disease, 24-hour care is required with regard to daily activities such as eating, grooming and toileting. The financing of care for Alzheimer's Disease -- including costs of diagnosis, treatment, nursing home care, informal care, and lost wages -- is estimated to be more than \$80 billion each year. The federal government covers \$4.4 billion and the states, another \$4.1 billion. Much of the remaining costs are borne by patients and their families.

## ALZHEIMER'S ASSOCIATION:

The Alzheimer's Association, founded in 1980, is a privately-funded national voluntary health organization. Headquartered in Chicago, the Alzheimer's Association has more than 1,600 support groups and 207 Chapters nationwide. The Alzheimer's Association is dedicated to research for the prevention, cure and treatment of Alzheimer's Disease and related disorders and to providing support and assistance to the afflicted patients and their families.

The Alzheimer's Association has five major goals: (1) Supporting research into causes, treatments, cures and prevention; (2) Stimulating education and public awareness of both laypeople and professionals on Alzheimer's Disease; (3) Encouraging Chapter formation for a nationwide family support network and implementation of programs at the local level; (4) Advocacy for improved public policy and needed legislation at federal, state and local levels; (5) Patient and family service to aid present and future victims and caregivers.

Previously known as the Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, the Alzheimer's Association adopted its shortened name and new logo in 1988 with the identifying phrase "Someone to Stand By You," which better reflects its mission.

Alzheimer's Disease International, consisting of 17 member countries, was formed in 1984 to share program and research developments on Alzheimer's Disease worldwide.

## ACTIVITIES:

The Association's programs and services cover a range of areas that encompass public policy, education, family support, nursing home and patient care, respite care and autopsy assistance.

The Association publishes the **Alzheimer's Association Newsletter** quarterly for more than 600,000 concerned readers nationwide. It produces and distributes various educational brochures, books and other publications for Alzheimer patients and family members. It also periodically publishes manuals for health and social service professionals on such topics as nursing home care for Alzheimer patients. The Alzheimer's Association sponsors a month-long public awareness campaign for National Alzheimer's Disease Month each November.

Through its Medical and Scientific Advisory Board, the Association promotes and funds Alzheimer research. Its Autopsy Assistance Network aids families in making the difficult decision about autopsy to confirm the diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease.

In addition to its Chicago headquarters, the Association maintains an office in Washington, D.C. to ensure that the needs of Alzheimer's patients and their families are taken into consideration as legislation and public policy are developed. Each year the Association holds a public policy forum in Washington, D.C., and presents Congress and the President with a "National Program to Conquer Alzheimer's Disease." In addition, Chapter public policy committees promote issues such as long-term care financing, research, and improved services to local, state, and federal governments.

## INFORMATION LINE:

A nationwide 24-hour information and referral line links families who need assistance with nearby Chapters. Those interested in help may call 800-621-0379 (Illinois residents call 800-572-6037).