

# Alzheimer's 101

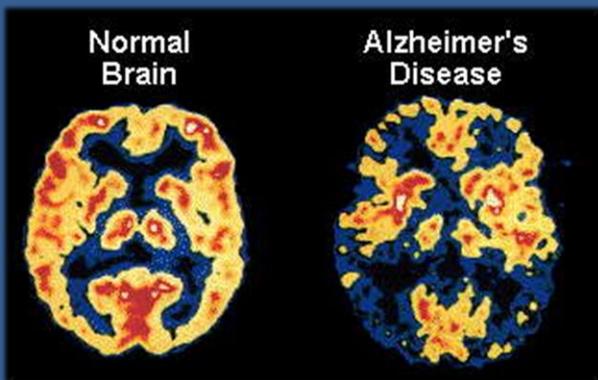
## *For caregivers*

In 2018, around 25,000 Canadians will be newly diagnosed with dementia, adding to the 564,000 across the country already living with a form of the illness. While these statistics might seem shocking, they show just how pervasive dementia has become and how crucial it is to educate everyone about dementia in case they or their loved ones are ever diagnosed with it. In this newsletter, we focus on one of the most common causes of dementia, Alzheimer's disease, and look into how individuals who find themselves in a caregiving role can help their loved one manage their disease while also taking care of themselves.

### What is Alzheimer's?

You might have heard the words, Alzheimer's and dementia, being used interchangeably, but they don't actually mean the same thing. Dementia refers to a group of specific symptoms that are caused by certain brain disorders, such as Alzheimer's, Lewy Body disease, Parkinson's disease etc. Alzheimer's therefore causes dementia, or in other words, symptoms that are characteristic of dementia.

Alzheimer's is a degenerative disease which gradually destroys brain cells, leading to cognitive and functional impairment, mobility issues, and changes in mood and behaviour. The Alzheimer Society of British Columbia explains that the disease is caused due to the development of plaques (dense deposits of a protein) that block transfer of signals between nerve cells and tangles, which are clumps of a protein that begin to twist and tangle, eventually killing off the supply of nutrients to cells and damaging brain tissue.



### Symptoms

It is normal to experience minor forgetfulness from time-to-time; however, if someone is experiencing serious memory loss that begins to interfere with their daily lives and functionality, it is important that they see their doctor.

According to Alzheimer's Association, some common symptoms of the illness to watch out for are:

- Memory loss – forgetting things, difficulty remembering newly learned information, frequently asking for the same information, difficulty carrying out familiar tasks such as cooking or driving, forgetting words, difficulty with numbers or familiar mathematical calculations
- Disorientation – losing track of time, forgetting where they are, loss of ability to navigate
- Difficulty with decision-making or applying judgement
- Changes to physical ability – difficulty walking, sitting, impaired dexterity (usually in later stages)
- Changes in mood, personality, and interests – feeling depressed, having emotional outbursts, becoming withdrawn



### Is Alzheimer's curable?

There is no known cure for Alzheimer's disease, which can make it all the more terrifying for caregivers and for those who have been diagnosed. While there are a number of medications that may alleviate some symptoms, the best line of attack against Alzheimer's is the route of prevention.

While some common risk factors for Alzheimer's disease, such as old age and genetics, are outside of our control, Alzheimer's has at least seven risk factors that are considered "modifiable", meaning that we can lower the risk by the choices we make. These risk factors include smoking, diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, lack of physical activity, depression, and low education. Most of these risks can be reduced with healthy life choices, such as avoiding smoking, eating a healthy diet (including whole grains, vegetables and fruits, fish), getting regular exercise, maintaining mental well-being, and taking time to read and learn something new. Note that these healthy choices are not only good prevention habits but are also beneficial for those diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

### Caregiving for a loved one with Alzheimer's

Most individuals with Alzheimer's in their later stages of the disease lose the mental, cognitive, and the physical faculty to function independently and therefore require caregiving. Being a caregiver for a loved one with Alzheimer's can be daunting as well as emotionally and physically draining. Knowing how to provide the right kind of care and how to access support when needed is crucial for ensuring the loved one's well-being and for avoiding burnout.



Here are a few starting points for those who find themselves in the position of a caregiver:

#### Caregiving tips

- Educate yourself on Alzheimer's as much as possible. Talk to a physician or access your local Alzheimer's Society for information.
- An individual with Alzheimer's will require more assistance with their routine activities as the disease progresses. While assisting your loved one, it is important to simplify each activity as much as possible so that they are able to perform some of the daily activities themselves. Some possible tips include preparing a bath for the loved one, laying out their clothing, setting a reminder to use the washroom, showing them how to brush their teeth, and keeping meals simple and easy to consume. A time will come when they may require more direct assistance in most activities.
- Encourage your loved one to practice regular self-care, such as getting enough sleep at night, exercising as much as they are able to, and participating in social activities to prevent isolation.
- As the disease progresses, you may have to look at options for in-home respite services, adult day services, or residential care. A good place to start is by visiting the Alzheimer's Society of B.C. and the government of BC website that provide information on provincial support services.

#### Self-care tips for caregivers

- When taking care of a loved one, it is easy to forget to take care of yourself. Neglecting your health is not only detrimental to yourself but it will also seriously impair your ability to provide care. It is therefore important to acknowledge that you need to take care of yourself and to push away any thoughts of guilt that may arise.
- It is important to take a break from caregiving from time to time. Request a family member and/or friend to help you with your loved one for a few hours every week or look into respite services such as visiting nurses, adult day services, or short-term residential care.
- Look into compassionate care leave options at your workplace. Service Canada offers a number of benefits to eligible caregivers who have to take extended time off work for compassionate/ end-of-life care.
- Find a caregiver support group in your community. Alzheimer Society of B.C. offers a number of support groups that cater to caregivers and also those who have been diagnosed with the disease.

**If you are experiencing undue stress from caregiving, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program provider.**

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BCI Consulting Inc. 1-800-668-2055  
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