



Commission
on
Aging

Senior Update

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Senior Update

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Alzheimer's Disease

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Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a neurological condition in which the nerve cells in the brain die. As the disease advances, cognitive abilities are eroded. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia.

Facts

An estimated four million people nationwide have been diagnosed with AD. In 1998, the percentage of older persons with moderate or severe memory impairment ranged from about 4 percent among people aged 65-69 to about 36 percent among people aged 85 or older. AD is the ninth leading cause of death among those aged 65 and older.

Symptoms

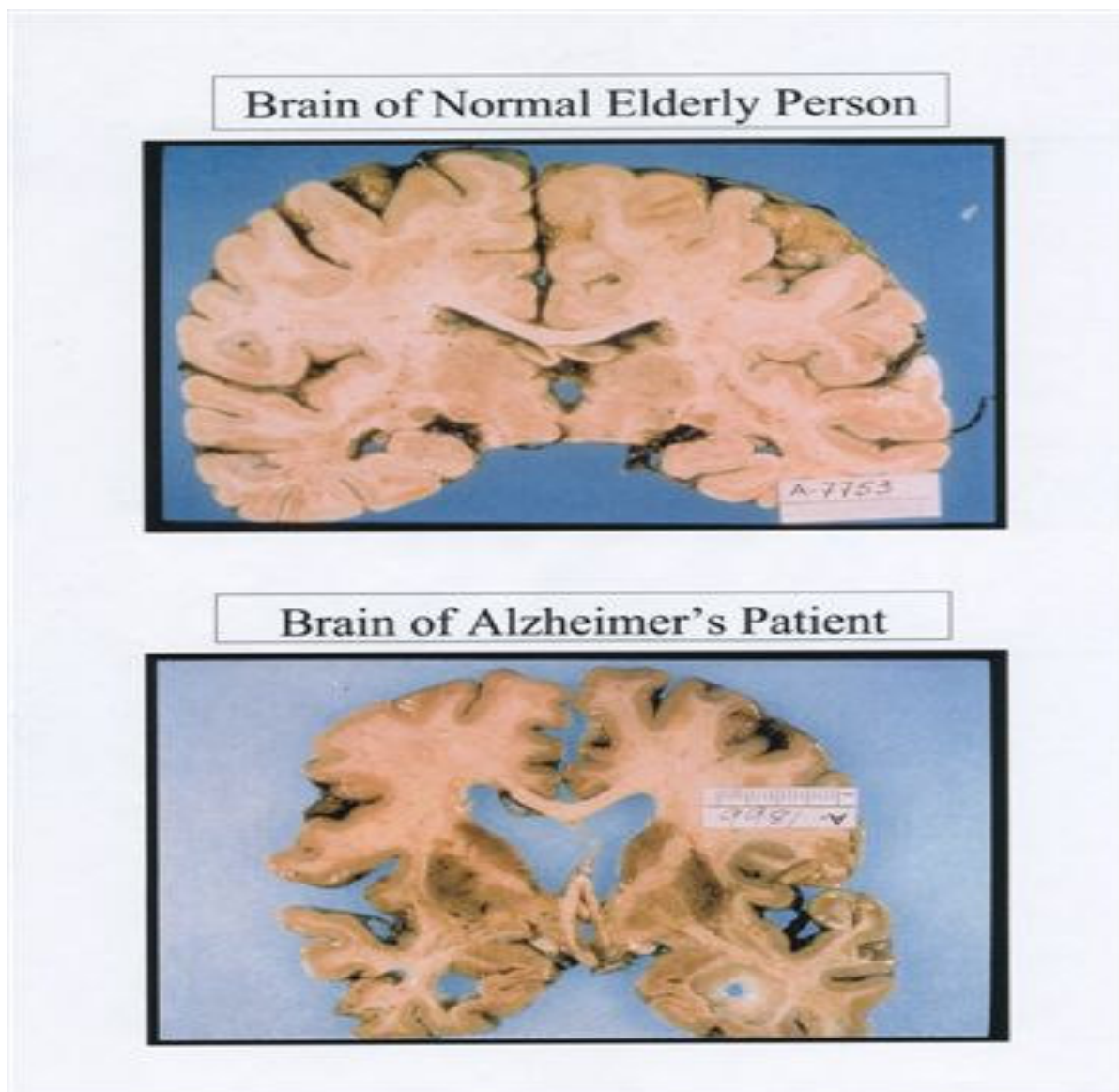
To help people understand the changes that occur as the disease progresses, AD is broken into stages: early, middle and late. It is normal for people with AD to have "good days" and "bad days." For example, a person with early-stage AD may not show any symptoms one day; the next day he or she may have trouble remembering your name or finding the milk in the refrigerator.

Treatment after Diagnosis

Presently, researchers cannot definitively say what causes Alzheimer's disease, and there is currently no cure. While the ideal medication for AD would prevent or cure it, have no side effects, be inexpensive and be readily available, researchers have not yet discovered the ideal treatment.

It is possible, however, to reduce some of the common symptoms of early-stage AD with medications. As of January 2002, the FDA had approved four drugs designed to improve memory and slow the progression of AD. The first one, approved in 1993, tacrine (Cognex) has many side effects, including potential liver damage and has shown disappointing memory results. For these reasons, it is seldom prescribed. Three newer drugs, donepezil (Aricept), rivastigmine (Exelon) and galantamine (Reminyl), have proved beneficial in improving memory, and have fewer side effects. Unfortunately, these drugs are not effective for everyone, and their effectiveness is limited to the early and middle stages of AD. Another drug, memantine HCl (Namenda) is available. Originally considered for use in moderate to severe stage AD, it is sometimes prescribed for use earlier.

Alzheimer's Brain vs. Normal Brain



The pictures above illustrate how the Alzheimer's disease gradually produces abnormalities in certain portions of the brain. The particular behavioral characteristics of the disease depend on which area of the brain is most affected by the disease process. Memory, particularly of recent events, is usually the first to deteriorate. View this picture in color at: http://www.alamedasocialservices.org/public/services/elders_and_disabled_adults/aaa.cfm.

NOTE: Most of the information for this article was obtained from the “It Takes Two” Training provided by **Family Caregiver Alliance** 180 Montgomery Street, Suite 1100, San Francisco, CA 94104
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