

Memory Moment

Basics of Alzheimer's Disease

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One of the most frequent questions I'm asked by families, caregivers, or people living with cognitive impairment is "What is the difference between dementia and Alzheimer's disease?" This concept can be a little confusing, especially if you are in the midst of grappling with a recent diagnosis. In honor of November as National Alzheimer's Awareness month, I'd like to take some time to explain this question, as well as go into some basic information on Alzheimer's disease.

Think of dementia as an "umbrella word". Dementia itself describes a set of symptoms (memory loss, confusion, impaired judgment, sensory processing, cognitive changes, etc.) At its core, dementia is a processing disorder – how the brain receives information and works changes. Many people think of dementia just as "memory loss" but thinking of it as a processing disorder helps us understand why we might see changes in ability to understand language, make rational decisions, or have mobility changes causing falls. Under the "umbrella" of dementia, there are many different types or forms of dementia. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, making up over 60% of all dementia diagnoses. Some other common forms of dementia include Lewy Body Dementia, Frontotemporal Dementia, Mixed Dementia, Vascular Dementia, and Dementia associated with Parkinson's disease.

Alzheimer's is a progressive dementia, meaning that a person's functioning declines over a number of years. There are different types of Alzheimer's disease, set apart by the age of onset symptoms. Early-onset Alzheimer's disease is a diagnosis that's given to a person living with Alzheimer's disease before age 65. Progression of symptoms varies widely from person to person, but generally follows a downward sloping progression.

Alzheimer's itself has several key warning signs/symptoms that a person may notice in the early stages of the disease before diagnosis. Close family and friends may also notice some of these symptoms and encourage their loved one to seek guidance from their primary care physician or a specialist such as a neurologist or geriatrician. If you or a loved one are experiencing any of the warning signs below, it is a good time to see a specialist for an evaluation.

- Changes in mood and/or personality
- Memory loss that interferes with daily life
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks
- Withdrawal from regular activities
- Impaired judgment
- Challenges in planning or solving problems
- Difficulty with language

- Delayed processing time
- Communication deficits
- Confusion
- Difficulty with math and finances

Adapted from the Alzheimer's Association Know the 10 Signs of Alzheimer's

Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness (EAAA) is a volunteer-run, not-for-profit organization founded to provide education and support to all families, caregivers, and people with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia in Effingham County and the surrounding area. For more information about Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness, check out their website at www.effinghamalz.org. If you are a caregiver & have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free to call Shannon Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.