



## Alzheimer's disease: Early detection matters

Alzheimer's disease is characterised by irreversible, progressive mental degeneration that can happen in middle or old age (but it is possible to develop the condition in your 30s). The disease causes nerve cells to die, damaging the structure and chemistry of the brain.

Alzheimer's disease was named after Dr Alois Alzheimer who discovered many abnormal clumps (amyloid plaques) and tangled bundles of fibres (neurofibrillary or tau tangles) in the brain of a woman after she had died of a strange mental illness in 1906.

Approximately 750 000 South Africans have Alzheimer's disease but we still do not fully understand what causes it and there is no cure. But treatment is available to help people preserve quality of life, delay and relieve some of the symptoms.



### Signs and symptoms

The main symptom of Alzheimer's disease is memory loss. It is often the symptom people notice first.

But it's not just about losing your memory. The disease starts slowly and progresses over time. Usually symptoms only occur ten years after changes started happening in the brain. As the disease progresses, memory problems become worse and further symptoms can develop such as:

- Confusion and disorientation
- Depression
- Personality changes such as becoming aggressive, withdrawn, irritable, demanding and suspicious of others
- Hallucinations and loss of inhibitions
- Delusions (believing things that are untrue)
- Problems with language and speech
- Problems moving around without assistance.



### When to seek help

Everyone forgets things at times. How often have you misplaced your car keys or forgotten the name of a person you just met? Some degree of memory problems, as well as a modest decline in other thinking skills, is a fairly common part of getting older. But there is a difference between normal changes in memory and those associated with Alzheimer's disease.

It can be frightening to think that you or a loved one might have Alzheimer's disease; but don't stick your head in the sand. Getting a prompt diagnosis is important, even if it is challenging. If you are concerned about memory loss, see your Healthcare Professional. There are tests to determine the degree and cause of memory loss.

The Healthcare Professional will ask many questions. Make sure a family member or friend goes along to help answer the questions. Other people might have observed behaviour or changes that the patient has not noticed.



### Coping with Alzheimer's

**Caring for a person with Alzheimer's disease can place high physical, emotional and financial demands on the person's loved ones, from things like:**

- The demands of day-to-day care
- Changes in family roles
- Decisions about placement in a care facility or caring for the person at home.

**Coping with the demands and challenges involves:**

- Becoming well-informed about the disease
- Learning about the various stages of Alzheimer's and ways to deal with difficult behaviours and other challenges by joining Alzheimer's support programmes
- Learning good coping skills
- Building a strong support network
- Arranging respite care (temporary institutional care providing relief for the usual carer)
- Staying physically active – it provides physical and emotional benefits.

The National Institute on Ageing says some **caregivers have found that joining a support group is a critical lifeline**. They say these support groups allow caregivers to find respite, express concerns, share experiences, get tips and receive emotional comfort. Visit [alzheimers.org.za](http://alzheimers.org.za) to find support groups in South Africa.



### Bankmed's cover for Alzheimer's disease

Bankmed members who are on the Plus Plan or Comprehensive Plan can register on the Chronic Illness Benefit if they have Alzheimer's disease so that they do not use up their day-to-day benefits for care of this condition.

For more information about how we cover Alzheimer's treatment, please call us on 0800 BANKMED (0800 226 5633) or send an e-mail to [enquiries@bankmed.co.za](mailto:enquiries@bankmed.co.za)

#### References

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