

Alzheimer *Society*

Alzheimer's disease

Dispelling the myths



Myth and Reality

Over the years, many myths have evolved about what Alzheimer's disease is, who gets it and how it affects people who have it. These myths can add to the stigma attached to the disease and stand in the way of our ability to understand and help people with it. At the Alzheimer Society, we believe the sooner we dispel the myths, the better we'll be able to respond to the reality.

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, degenerative disease of the brain. It most often occurs in people over 65, but can affect adults at an earlier age.

Myth 1 Alzheimer's disease is a disease that only affects older people.

Reality: Age is the most significant known risk factor for Alzheimer's disease. But most people do not develop the disease as they age. There are actually two forms of Alzheimer's disease. Young-onset Alzheimer's disease is rarer. It can affect people from their 30s to their mid-60s. Late-onset Alzheimer's disease is more common and develops when a person is in their mid-60s and older. What's most important to understand is that Alzheimer's disease is not a normal part of aging.

Myth 2 Because someone in my family has Alzheimer's disease, I'm definitely going to get it.

Reality: Both young-onset and late-onset Alzheimer's disease can have a genetic component. Three genetic mutations are clearly associated with young-onset Alzheimer's disease. If your parent has one of these mutations, you have a 50/50 chance of developing young-onset Alzheimer's disease. Late-onset Alzheimer's disease develops due

to a combination of our environment, lifestyle and our genes. For instance, one genetic variant has been found to increase the risk, but some people with this variant never develop Alzheimer's disease. Researchers are working to understand genetic risk factors better. You can ask your doctor about genetic testing and whether it would help assess your own risk.¹

Myth 3 **There is a cure for Alzheimer's disease.**


Reality: At present there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease. But there are medications and other approaches that, in the first few years, can often help with some of the symptoms and improve quality of life. The good news is that researchers have made great progress and there are a number of drugs in clinical trials that act directly against the disease process.

Myth 4 **Memory loss means Alzheimer's disease.**

Reality: Many people have trouble with their memory as they get older. But that in itself does not mean they have Alzheimer's disease. When memory loss affects day-to-day function, it's best to visit a doctor to determine the cause. This is especially important when combined with lack of judgment or changes in communication abilities.

Myth 5 **Aluminum causes Alzheimer's disease.**

Reality: Although there's been much research into the connection between aluminum and Alzheimer's disease, there's no conclusive evidence that aluminum is one of the causes of the disease. Alzheimer's disease



There is a growing amount of evidence that lifestyle choices that keep mind and body fit may help reduce the risk.

is linked to many risk factors, including age, genetics, lifestyle and environmental factors.

Myth 6 Alzheimer's disease is preventable.

Reality: There is no single factor that can prevent Alzheimer's disease. There is, however, a growing amount of evidence that lifestyle choices that keep the mind and body fit may help reduce the risk. These choices include being physically active; eating healthily, including fresh fruits, vegetables and fish; challenging your brain; reducing stress; keeping your blood pressure, cholesterol, weight and blood sugar levels within recommended ranges; avoiding traumatic brain injury; and staying socially active.

Myth 7 Vitamins, supplements and memory boosters can prevent Alzheimer's disease.

Reality: Many studies have tested the effectiveness of products such as vitamins E, B and C, ginkgo biloba, folate and selenium in preventing Alzheimer's disease. The findings are mixed and inconclusive. However, research in this area is ongoing.

1. National Institutes of Health. (2021). *Alzheimer's disease genetics fact sheet*.

Myth 8 If I'm diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, my life is over.

Reality: Many people with Alzheimer's disease live meaningful, active lives for a number of years. They have a sense of purpose and do not feel their lives are over. Research indicates that making healthy lifestyle choices can help to slow the progression of the disease. Earlier diagnosis and medications are also helping. It is important that people living with Alzheimer's disease access services and activities to optimize their quality of life.

Myth 9 All people who have Alzheimer's disease experience distressing changes in their behaviour.

Reality: Alzheimer's disease affects each person differently. For the person with Alzheimer's disease, the loss of memory and the resulting confusion are often frustrating, or even frightening. Learning about the disease, adapting the person's surroundings and changing the way we communicate with the person can often prevent adverse responses and changes in behaviour.

Myth 10 People with Alzheimer's disease cannot understand what is going on around them.

Reality: Some people with Alzheimer's disease understand what is going on around them; others have difficulty. The disease does affect a person's ability to communicate and make sense of the world around them, although it affects each person differently. When we assume someone does not understand, feelings can be hurt unintentionally. Treat the person with dignity and respect.

Putting an end to the myths

At the Alzheimer Society, we would like to put an end to the myths surrounding Alzheimer's disease.

Get the facts:

- learn about the disease
- seek help
- treat people with respect

The Alzheimer Society is the leading nationwide health charity for people living with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Active in communities across Canada, the Society:

- Offers information, support and education programs for people with dementia, their families and caregivers
- Funds research to find a cure and improve the care of people with dementia
- Promotes public education and awareness of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias to ensure people know where to turn for help
- Influences policy and decision-making to address the needs of people with Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers

For more information, contact your local Alzheimer Society or visit our website at alzheimer.ca.

Help for Today. Hope for Tomorrow...[®]

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Alzheimer Society

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