

Narrator

Imagine your husband of 40 years has been missing for hours, when he finally comes home, he has no idea where he was or what he was doing. This can be a defining moment when you know something is wrong...and you may have to confront the possibility your spouse has Alzheimer's disease.

Stephen Aronson, MD, University of Michigan Medical School

"People lose the ability to recognize people, family, places, things that they used to recognize and know how to deal with and know how to interact with."

Narrator

Alzheimer's disease gradually diminishes a person's ability to reason, remember, imagine and learn. Over time, cognitive abilities -- like being able to process information, or have abstract reasoning and problem solving skills--significantly decrease, leaving patients unable to perform simple tasks and function on their own.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, more than 5 million Americans are living with the disease and that number is expected to increase. In fact the latest information from the Alzheimer's Association estimates 10 million baby boomers will eventually develop Alzheimer's Disease.

Bill Thies, PhD, Alzheimer's Association

"The major risk factor for Alzheimer's disease is age and obviously our population is about to go through a profound aging process."

Narrator

Recognizing Alzheimer's disease may not be easy. But there are some symptoms to look for.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, there are 10 warning signs:

1. Memory loss
2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks
3. Problems with language
4. Disorientation to time and place
5. Poor or decreased judgment
6. Problems with abstract thinking
7. Misplacing things
8. Changes in mood or behavior
9. Changes in personality
10. Loss of initiative

Narrator

Dr. Rachel Smith Doody, the Director of the "Alzheimer's Disease and Memory Disorder Center" at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston says the most constant feature is a short-term memory problem.

Dr. Rachel Doody

"If you test a person formally, a hallmark of Alzheimer's Disease is difficulty creating new memories and retaining them over a period of time."

Narrator

In Alzheimer's disease brain cells rapidly degenerate and patients eventually lose the ability to communicate efficiently as the disease progresses over time.

Daniel Kaufer, MD University of North Carolina

"The changes that occur in the brains in patients with Alzheimer's disease involve both physical and chemical changes. Part of normal aging involves some shrinkage of the brain due to gradual loss of brain cells. However in Alzheimer's disease this process of cell loss is accelerated and by the end stages of the disease up to a third of brain mass has been lost."

Narrator

Dr. Bill Thies, the Vice Present of Medical and Scientific affairs at the Alzheimer's Association, explains the chemical changes happening in the brains of Alzheimer's patients.

Bill Thies, PhD, Alzheimer's Association

"Amyloid is a protein that occurs naturally in the body. It tends to accumulate in the brains of people with Alzheimer's disease. Many scientists think that this amyloid is toxic and it is the toxicity of that amyloid that results in the brain cell death that we associate with the disease."

Marc Agronin MD, Miami Jewish Home and Hospital

"We see these in the brains in every one, as they get older. But we just see so many more of them in an Alzheimer's disease brain. And we don't fully understand why these build up tremendously in the brains of individuals of Alzheimer's disease."

Narrator

Coming up, we'll meet 3 patients and their loved ones who are finding ways to manage this disease and live fulfilling lives with Alzheimer's.

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Natural Sound

"That's gorgeous."

Narrator

Sherry Dellon has a family history of Alzheimer's disease. Her mother had it and her sister is now living with it. Diagnosed at age 70 Sherry now has to face her own illness.

Sherry Dellon, Patient

"My kids were nagging me that I'm getting very forgetful and that I really should go and get it checked out."

Alex Dellon, Sherry's Son

"Over time what I have noticed with my mom is that she may repeat the same story a couple of times, she may not remember a conversation that we had a day or two ago."

Daniel Kaufer, University of North Carolina

"What people have already learned they are able to retrieve to recall early on in the disease but the ability to lay down a new memory is specifically what's impaired early on."

Natural Sound

"And then I'm going to have you flip it over and see how many you can remember."

Alex Dellon, Sherry's Son

"The behaviors that we noticed in my mom that made us want her to get checked out were pretty much a lapse in memory. Just little things, nothing major. Maybe forgetting where she had placed something. Maybe forgetting an event that we had talked about, and sometimes repetition in telling a story."

Narrator

Sherry is in the early stage of Alzheimer's disease. In this stage, patients have memory impairment and some functional limitations, but overall they are fairly independent. There are several stages of Alzheimer's disease, often identified as: mild, moderate, severe and very severe. Since increasing memory loss is inevitable with Alzheimer's disease, soon after a diagnosis is made, it's a good idea for the patient and caregivers to make specific plans for the future.

Twice a week Walt Kline volunteers at the local food bank in Apex, North Carolina. For 37 years he was a manager for IBM and his memories of dealing with customers are easier for him to recall than this day at the food bank.

Walt Kline, Patient

"One day I may have no memory ok and that I find very scary. Because you don't know why it happened. Is there a reason for it? Well, what did I do that made me forget everything you know what I mean it's scary?"

Peggy Kline, Walt's Wife

"When things started to change it was mainly with personality and the forgetfulness of things. Personality changes included more belligerence, more annoyance. I think it's harder for the person, the family, and the ones who love the person that's diagnosed with Alzheimer's or dementia to accept it."

Narrator

After being married for over 18 years, Walt Kline's wife Peggy began wondering if his abnormal behaviors were related to something she was doing wrong.

Peggy Kline, Walt's Wife

"I really didn't know what it was. I thought actually that it was something that I was doing. I thought that I was losing my communication skills with my husband. And then he would forget like turning off water or turning off the stove and if you approached him about it he would you know just brush it aside like nothing had happened, that that's not an important thing."

Daniel Kaufer, University of North Carolina

"When that memory loss for specific details becomes more consistent and progresses beyond names to recent events or other items that occur then that is the type of memory problem associated with Alzheimer's disease."

Narrator

Next, we'll see how the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease is made and what this diagnosis means for both the patient and the caregiver.

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Narrator

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. Dementia is the loss of mental skills affecting the tasks of daily life. In a few cases, dementia is caused by a problem that can be treated. So it's important to rule out conditions such as hypothyroidism, syphilis, benign brain tumors, subdural hematomas, and critical B12 deficiency before diagnosing Alzheimer's disease.

Dr. Rachel Doody

"I think that specialized centers and clinicians who see a lot of patients have gotten quite good at making a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease."

Narrator

Diagnosing Alzheimer's disease is complex and requires extensive testing.

Stephen Aronson, MD, University of Michigan Medical School

"Alzheimer's disease is best diagnosed by a physician taking a careful history."

Natural Sound

"So what have you been doing to keep busy lately?"

Stephen Aronson, MD, University of Michigan Medical School

"The fact that the individual is no longer functioning the same way that he or she was before is often really the best indicator that there's a significant problem."

Natural Sound

"Set the hands for ten after eleven."

Narrator

Along with a thorough patient history, doctors will always perform cognitive tests. Some doctors conduct a mental status test to see if Alzheimer's disease is affecting a person's thinking abilities.

Doctor Dushyant Utamsingh is a primary care physician in Boca Raton Florida whose practice includes many Alzheimer's Disease patients. He says some simple questions often yield important clues.

Dr. Utamsingh, Primary Care Physician

"Basically you ask the patient what year is it, what season is it, what month, where is he, what floor is he on. You ask him to count backwards. Then you give him some pictures of something and ask him to remember what you've showed him."

Narrator

In addition, a neurological examination is performed. This exam tests a patient's motor system, sensory skills, reflexes, coordination, and balance. Doctors will also request lab work, like cat scans, x-rays, and blood work to rule out other possible causes for the cognitive changes and memory loss.

Today, it's more important than ever to diagnose Alzheimer's early.

Dr. Green

"It's best if you can make the diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease earlier in the disease process. The reason for this is that there are treatments available which will delay some of the functional declines that an individual will suffer. So you can hold on to certain abilities a bit longer with these treatments."

Bill Thies, PhD, Alzheimer's Association

"The other piece of hope that I would offer to people with Alzheimer's disease is that the sooner they identify the disease, the sooner they can get on with their life. And there are going to be some choices that they are going to have to make that are best done in the early stages of the disease."

Narrator

In addition, the earlier a person is diagnosed, the earlier they can begin to take advantage of the extensive network of community resources that are available to provide support and enhance quality of life.

Marc Agronin MD, Miami Jewish Home and Hospital

"You know unfortunately we can't tell people there's a cure for it but what we can tell them is that there are treatments that can improve the symptoms of the disease."

Narrator

There are medications doctors can prescribe that can slow down the progression of the symptoms related to Alzheimer's. These treatments won't reverse the damage already done to brain cells, but they can slow down the rate at which patients' progress.

Stephen Aronson, MD, University of Michigan

"But it's critically important for these kinds of interventions to begin as early in the course of the disease as possible; which is why it's so important for the individual to get diagnosed as early as possible."

Bill Thies, PhD, Alzheimer's Association

"We currently have drugs that are used fairly commonly; they do help people and they offer some benefit."

Narrator

Sherry Dellon was diagnosed early and began treatment. She is now seeing some positive results from the medication.

Sherry Dellon, Patient

"I think that I catch a name faster and if I'm talking about a place and I can't think of the place for the moment the name of the place that comes to me quite often. So that's why I think that the pill is helping."

Narrator

Dr. Bernie Resiman, is a former professor at Brandeis University outside of Boston. Elaine, Bernie's wife of 50 years and his major caregiver, believes that he first started showing early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease about ten years ago.

Elaine Reisman

"At that point, his secretaries also were letting me know that he kept asking them to do the same things over and over again."

Narrator

But it wasn't until a few years later, when Bernie retired and Elaine helped him clean out his office, that she found clear evidence that something was seriously wrong.

Elaine Reisman

"I opened up a file and it would be some title and there would be a mish-mash in there from many years from many subjects, and it was further documentation to me that he was having difficulties."

Narrator

Shortly thereafter, a diagnosis was made, and Bernie began taking medications to try and slow down the disease's progress. For the most part, he has continued taking medications ever since.

Elaine Reisman

"What's going on now, it's hard to know because it's been so many years, whether the medication is making a difference."

Narrator

Along with drug therapies, there are some other important things for caregivers and patients to keep in mind.

Stephen Aronson, MD, University of Michigan Medical School

"The individual with Alzheimer's in addition to getting the appropriate medical treatments also needs to stay active."

Dr. Utamsingh, Primary Care Physician

"Exercise is recommended three to four times a week for 35 to 40 minutes at a time."

Narrator

To stay active Walt Kline regularly attends an adult day care program at the Total Life Center in Raleigh, North Carolina. Michael Boles is the director of adult day care services at the Center, which takes a holistic approach to patients with this illness.

Michael Boles, Total Life Center

"We treat the total person their mind their body their spirit. And we do that through our activities and through the socialization and the safety that we offer."

Natural Sound

"Hold em and back down."

Michael Boles, Total Life Center

"During the course of the day we're going to make sure that they get physical exercise so that they stay mobile and fit. They are going to get cognitive exercise so that they continue to think and use their brains in ways that keep them talking and moving and acting and thinking."

Daniel Kaufer, MD, University of North Carolina

"This is where we also use available community resources including support groups and day care programs collectively to try and maximize the patient's quality of life and also their safety."

Peggy Kline, Walt's Wife

"So what I did was I called my local chapter of the Alzheimer's Association and found out they do have a support group for the person that has Alzheimer's. That way I felt that maybe if Walt talked to other people who are experiencing the same things then maybe he won't feel so alone."

Narrator

Exercising the brain may also help Alzheimer's Disease patients.

Marc Agronin, MD, Miami Jewish Homes and Hospital

"There has been a lot of focus on something that we call cognitive rehabilitation and the question is can you actually re-train someone, can you provide them with mental exercises to improve the course of it."

Natural Sound

"Do you remember the last time you took your pill?"

Narrator

Sherry is participating in a research study involving cognitive rehabilitation.

Alex Dellon, Sherry's Son

"They do actually exercises in cognitive functioning. Different ways of doing things, for instance keeping a journal or writing things down in a book so that they don't forget. Making sure that they take their pills on time and writing down in the book when they take their pills... it's kind of like a reminder for them."

Marc Agronin, Miami Jewish Homes and Hospital

"It's just another way of keeping a person actively involved in life and that could be very important."

Natural Sound

"I finally pressed it into the brain."

Narrator

But family members and caregivers also may need extra support. In addition to trying to swim every day while Bernie is in day care, Elaine has also taken up teaching drama at the retirement program Bernie started at Brandeis.

Elaine Reisman

"We have just a ball. We act a little bit, we discuss the books, we talk about the playwright. It's just great. And it's been wonderful for me because I have a life aside from Alzheimer's."

Narrator

Bernie's Alzheimer's is considered to be well into the Moderate Stage of the disease, and has become more acute over the past three years. But Bernie and his family are not alone.

Ultimately, all patients with Alzheimer's disease, if they live long enough, will have profound Alzheimer's disease which means: they will no longer be able to care for themselves. Alzheimer's disease patients in this stage will need professional, full-time attention.

At this point, residential care should be considered. There are some important things to look for when determining what level of care is needed and deciding on a residential care facility.

Care Finder, an online guide from the Alzheimer's Association, can help make this decision a bit easier. Their website is www.alz.org.

Next, there is hope when dealing with Alzheimer's disease. We'll take a look at the future of Alzheimer's Disease research when we come back.

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Narrator

At the present time there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease but the search continues for new and more effective medications that can better manage it. One of the areas that offers the most hope is medical research.

Stephen Aronson, MD, University of Michigan Medical School

"We know that existing available treatments today when used early enough can slow down the progression of symptoms. And we also know that the availability of clinical trials today and hopefully clinical trials in the near future of other more promising medication approaches might even more measurably slow down the progression of this disease."

Narrator

Another area of focus is Alzheimer's prevention. Alzheimer's may not be preventable, but patients can lower their risk. Research suggests increasing exercise and physical activity and controlling vascular risk factors such as blood pressure, weight and diabetes may reduce the likelihood of developing Alzheimer's.

Stephen Aronson, MD, University of Michigan Medical School

"There are many things that one can do if not to prevent Alzheimer's disease at least to lower the risk or at least delay the onset of the disease. Generally what is good for the heart and the rest of the body is good for the brain."

Narrator

But if a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease is made, there is still hope.

Dr. Rachel Doody

"Alzheimer's Disease is a chronic disease that people can live with, and that they can actually live well with it. Right now we can't promise that to everybody, but that should be our goal for everybody."

Marc Agronin MD, Miami Jewish Home and Hospital

"There's a lot of pessimism about it because people assume that because we can't cure it there's nothing we can do and that's not true. There's a tremendous amount we can

do but the person has to be willing or the caregiver has to be willing to get engaged with the care system.”

Elaine Reisman

“I try to look at what we still have. We still can go out to dinner. We still go to music programs. We still are with friends. He’s still able to go swimming. You know, you have to grab onto what you’ve got.”

Peggy Kline, Walt’s Wife

“We said we could beat this thing in the sense that we don't have to let this disease rule our lives. We can still control it. We can still do things together.”

Walt Kline, Patient

“I will do anything I have to do if I know it’s going to help. I don’t care what it is if it looks like its going to help I am going to join in.”

This program was reviewed by

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For more information on Alzheimer’s Disease please visit the Alzheimer’s Association website @ www.alz.org or call 1-800-272-3900

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