

# Alzheimer's Disease: An Overview

## Terms to Know

**Dementia** is a medical condition that interferes with the way the brain works. Symptoms include anxiety, paranoia, personality changes, lack of initiative and difficulty acquiring new skills.

**Alzheimer's disease** is the most common form of dementia. It proceeds in stages over months or years and gradually destroys memory, reason, judgment, language and eventually the ability to carry out even simple tasks.

**Delirium** is a state of temporary but acute mental confusion that comes on suddenly. Symptoms may include anxiety, disorientation, tremors, hallucinations, delusions and incoherence. Alcohol or drugs (including medications) also may cause confusion. Delirium may be life-threatening and requires immediate medical attention.

## What Is Alzheimer's Disease?

In Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, problems with memory, judgment and thought processes make it hard for a person to work and take part in day-to-day life. Changes in mood and personality also may occur. Some two to four million persons have dementia associated with aging. Of these individuals, as many as two-thirds have Alzheimer's disease.

## Who Is Affected?

The chances of getting Alzheimer's disease increase with age. It usually occurs after age 65. Most people are not affected even at advanced ages. There are only two definite factors that increase the risk for Alzheimer's disease: a family history of dementia and Down syndrome.

### Family History of Dementia

Some forms of Alzheimer's disease are inherited. If Alzheimer's disease has occurred in your family members, other members are more likely to develop it. Discuss any family history of dementia with your family doctor.

### Down Syndrome

Persons with Down syndrome have a higher chance of getting Alzheimer's disease. Close relatives of persons with Down syndrome also may be at risk.

## What are the Signs of Alzheimer's Disease?

The classic sign of early Alzheimer's disease is a gradual loss of short-term memory. There are other signs to look for as well. Are you or someone you know having problems with any of these activities?

- **Learning and remembering new information.** Do you repeat things you say or do? Forget conversations or appointments? Forget where you put things?
- **Inability to recognize or use objects.** Are you finding it difficult to instantly recognize ordinary things like a pencil or find it hard to use everyday items like a toaster?
- **Handling complex tasks.** Do you have trouble performing tasks with many steps such as balancing a checkbook or cooking a meal?
- **Spatial ability and orientation.** Do you have trouble driving or finding your way around familiar places?
- **Language.** Do you have trouble finding the words to express what you want to say?
- **Behavior.** Do you have trouble paying attention? Are you more irritable or less trusting than usual? Do you get agitated easily?

If you have some of these signs, it doesn't mean you have Alzheimer's disease. Anyone can have a lapse of memory or show poor judgment now and then. And, just because you can't recall where you put the car keys doesn't mean you have Alzheimer's disease. However, when such lapses become frequent or dangerous, you should tell your doctor about them immediately.

### **Your Magellan Program is an Important Resource**

Log on to [www.MagellanHealth.com/member](http://www.MagellanHealth.com/member) or call your program's toll-free number 800-523-5668 to access information, articles and resources on Alzheimer's. Your program also provides expert help and support for individuals and families who are dealing with this disease.