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FACT SHEET:

Alzheimer's Disease

Definition

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is an incurable neurological disease in which changes in the nerve cells of the brain result in the death of a large number of cells. This destruction of brain cells eventually leads to serious mental deterioration, dementia, and death.

Facts

According to the U.S. Congress Office of Technology Assessment, there are an estimated 4 million to 6.8 million persons nationwide with dementia. Up to 500,000 Alzheimer's patients may reside in California.

Alzheimer's disease most commonly strikes individuals who are over 65; however, it can also afflict people much younger. An estimated 11 percent of all Americans over 65 and 25-50 percent of those over 85 have the disease. Alzheimer's accounts for more than half of the number of persons described as having dementia; people with Alzheimer's fill more than half the beds in skilled nursing facilities.

The mid-range medical and social service costs for one person with Alzheimer's are estimated to be more than \$47,500 over the course of the disease. The average annual direct and indirect costs for all Americans with Alzheimer's have been estimated at \$82.7 billion (1994 dollars).

Symptoms

During the first two to four years, people with Alzheimer's disease generally experience loss of memory for recent events, and disorientation. Later, the person will often have problems with progressive memory loss, judgment,

concentration and speech. Loss of physical abilities, similar to that seen in Parkinson's disease, occurs in a small proportion of affected people. At this point, the person may forget to take a bath and will have problems with once-routine chores.

In time, the person's family and/or caregiver will probably have to provide full-time supervision because the confused person may tend to wander off, engage in meaningless and often socially unacceptable behavior, and lose the ability to perform basic self-care activities.

People with Alzheimer's may also suffer sleeplessness, "sundowning" (confusion or agitation in the evening hours), and perseveration (repetition of the same ideas, words, movements, or thoughts). Final stage disease progression includes severe problems with eating, communication, and control of bodily functions.

Diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease

The diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease can only be made after other diseases with similar symptoms such as brain tumors, strokes, and infections can be ruled out. It must also be differentiated from the occasional forgetfulness that occurs during normal aging and from depression and malnutrition, which can produce early Alzheimer's-like memory loss. Ideally, this diagnosis is made after a thorough medical evaluation followed by extensive neurological and neuropsychological assessments. This examination may be performed at designated Alzheimer's evaluation centers or by skilled medical specialists. A definitive diagnosis can be made only by an autopsy.