



Getting a Diagnosis:

Finding Out if It Is
Alzheimer Disease

Alzheimer *Society*

Why Find Out?

Symptoms of Alzheimer Disease can be similar to symptoms of other conditions such as depression, thyroid or heart disease, infections, drug interactions, alcohol abuse or dehydration.

Finding out the cause of the symptoms can help people:

- Understand the source of the symptoms
- Get the proper care, treatment and support
- Plan for the future

Making the Diagnosis

There is currently no single test that can tell if a person has Alzheimer Disease. The diagnosis is made through a systematic assessment which eliminates other possible causes. Until the time when there is a conclusive test, doctors may continue to use the words "probable Alzheimer Disease". However, you should be aware that doctors making this diagnosis are accurate 80 to 90 per cent of the time.

Making the diagnosis can take time. The diagnosis can be made in a family doctor's office, a memory clinic or a hospital. The doctor may or may not feel that the person needs to see a number of health-care professionals to help make the diagnosis. These may include a psychologist, psychiatrist, neurologist, geriatrician, nurse, social worker or occupational therapist. They will look for problems with the person's memory, reasoning ability, language and judgment, and how these affect day-to-day function.

The process involves:

Medical History

Both the individual and family members or friends will be asked questions regarding the person's symptoms now and in the past. There will be questions about past illnesses and about family medical and psychiatric history.

Mental Status Exam

This part of the process tests the person's sense of time and place as well as the ability to remember, express him/herself and do simple calculations. It may involve exercises such as recalling words and objects, drawing and spelling, and questions such as "What year is it?"

Physical Exam

To help rule out other causes, a physical exam will be done. The doctor will look for heart, lung, liver, kidney or thyroid problems that may be causing the symptoms. To evaluate whether other nervous system disorders are causing the symptoms, the doctor will test muscle tone and strength, co-ordination, eye movement, speech and sensation.

Laboratory Tests

A number of tests will be done. Detailed blood work will be ordered to help detect problems such as anemia, diabetes, thyroid problems or infections that might be contributing to the symptoms.