

Early Detection and Diagnosis of Alzheimer's

Why is an early Alzheimer's diagnosis important?

Alzheimer's is a degenerative disease that gradually destroys brain cells and is ultimately fatal. In the mild stage, memory loss and confusion begin to affect people's everyday activities. In the moderate and severe stages, the progressive destruction of nerve cells not only causes memory failure, but also changes behavior and personality. Physical abilities – including the ability to walk, sit, and eventually, to swallow – become impaired and communication is difficult. Ultimately, round-the-clock, intensive care becomes necessary.

Receiving a formal diagnosis early in the disease progression enables the best medical care and health outcomes for people with the disease. Even without a way to cure or slow the progression of Alzheimer's, early diagnosis provides individuals and their caregivers with access to available treatments, support services, and the opportunity to enroll in clinical trials. The care team can better manage co-occurring conditions and reduce the risk for falls and injuries; better management may lessen secondary disorders and enhance quality of life. Also, individuals with an early diagnosis can create advance directives for their care and finances.

Why does public health need to act?

Early detection and diagnosis – a core public health service – is essential to protecting the wellbeing and safety of people with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. **Unfortunately, as many as half of people with dementia have never received a diagnosis.** Moreover, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, of those who have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or another dementia, only 35 percent of them or their caregivers are aware of the diagnosis. In contrast, more than 90 percent of seniors with cancer or cardiovascular disease have been told their diagnosis.

Responding to this disparity, [Healthy People 2020](#) has set a goal to increase diagnosis disclosure by 10 percent over the decade. And, the Medicare Annual Wellness Visit (AWV) includes a requirement for detection of possible cognitive impairment.

Increase the proportion of persons with diagnosed Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, or their caregiver, who are aware of the diagnosis.

-Healthy People 2020, Objective DIA-1

What can the public health community do to increase diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease?

Early detection and diagnosis are part of the [public health response](#) to Alzheimer's disease. Public health and its partners can take three basic steps to help individuals and health care providers discuss memory problems.

- Build public awareness about the warning signs of dementia and the benefits of early diagnosis, such as using the [10 Warning Signs](#) in agency websites or public awareness campaigns.
- Educate health care professionals on both the importance of detecting problems with cognition (including using the Medicare AWV to [discuss memory issues](#) and administer [validated cognitive assessment tools](#)) and the need to disclose a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or other dementia.
- Promote best practices, such as recommendations from the [Gerontological Society of America's](#) expert workgroup regarding diagnosis and care planning in primary care settings.