

What is Alzheimer disease?

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Transcript

[0:00 Introduction]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Here's what you need to know about Alzheimer disease. I'm Dr. Anthony Levinson, a psychiatrist and a professor with McMaster's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences.

[What is Alzheimer disease? 0:13]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Alzheimer disease is the most common cause of dementia. Dementia affects over half a million people in Canada alone. Alzheimer is a progressive brain disease that affects many different functions of the brain, including learning and memory, visual and spatial abilities, executive functioning, so how we plan and multitask, and may also affect language skills and social skills.

[What's the difference between normal age-related cognitive changes and a dementia? 0:39]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: We all have changes in our thinking and brain function as we age. Most people have what we call age-related cognitive changes. These are normal. It might include a slowing down of your thinking or occasionally having problems finding the right word, but you would eventually remember it. At the same time, you can also continue to see improvements in wisdom or vocabulary. What is worrisome is when things start to become more of an issue in terms of day-to-day function.

[What are the signs and symptoms? 1:09]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: So, what are some of the things that you might notice either in yourself or if you're looking at a family or friend? For example, you might see changes in learning or memory. People might begin forgetting dates or names or appointments more consistently. If they have medications, they might forget to take their medications, which can sometimes amplify some of the issues with cognitive impairment.

In terms of visual or spatial abilities, if you notice a loved one who is having problems finding their way or following directions, maybe even getting lost in familiar places, that can be a sign of dementia. Personality changes can also sometimes be seen, and people may have changes in their emotions. They may become more irritable or quick to anger. They may behave in

uncharacteristic or inappropriate ways and that can be another sign that there are changes in the brain happening.

All of those things would be important to disclose to clinician or a physician during an assessment. So as a family or friend, you can really help out in that assessment and really important to get a comprehensive assessment because there can be many different medical causes of brain changes. So, it's important to assess for those, rule those out, before making a diagnosis of a dementia like Alzheimer disease.

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