



News Release  
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## Alzheimer's

*How is Alzheimer's disease diagnosed?*



Colville Tribal Health, Nespelem Wash. – Jan. 8 ~ what are the signs of Alzheimer's disease?

Scientists continue to unravel the complex brain changes involved in the onset and progression of Alzheimer's disease. It seems likely that damage to the brain starts a decade or more before memory and other cognitive problems appear. During this preclinical stage of Alzheimer's disease, people seem to be symptom-free, but toxic changes are taking place in the brain.

Damage occurring in the brain of someone with Alzheimer's disease begins to show itself in very early clinical signs and symptoms. For most people with Alzheimer's—those who have the late onset variety symptoms first appear in their mid-60s. Signs of early onset Alzheimer's begin between a person's 30s and mid-60s. The first symptoms of Alzheimer's vary from person to person. Memory problems are typically one of the first signs of cognitive impairment related to Alzheimer's disease. Decline in non-memory aspects of cognition, such as word-finding, vision/spatial issues, and impaired reasoning or judgment, may also signal the very early stages of Alzheimer's disease. In mild Alzheimer's disease, a person may seem to be healthy but has more trouble making sense of the world around him or her. The realization that something is wrong often comes gradually to the person and his or her family. Alzheimer's disease is often diagnosed at this stage.

**How Is Alzheimer's disease Diagnosed?** Doctors use several methods and tools to help determine whether a person who is having memory problem has “possible Alzheimer's dementia” (dementia may be due to another cause), “probable Alzheimer's dementia” (no other cause for dementia can be found), or some other problem.

**To diagnose Alzheimer's doctors may:**

- Ask the person and a family member or friend questions about overall health, use of prescription and over-the-counter medicines, diet, past medical problems, ability to carry out daily activities, and changes in behavior or personality.
- Conduct tests of memory, problem solving, attention, counting, and language
- Carry out standard medical tests, such as blood and urine tests, to identify other possible causes of the problem
- Perform brain scans, such as computed tomography (CT), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), or positron emission tomography (PET), to rule out other possible causes for symptoms.

People with memory problems should return to the doctor every 6 to 12 months. It's important to note that Alzheimer's disease can be *definitively* diagnosed only after death, by linking clinical measures with an examination of brain tissue in an autopsy.

**What Happens Next?** If a primary care doctor suspects mild cognitive impairment or possible Alzheimer's, he or she may refer the patient to a specialist who can provide a detailed diagnosis or further assessment. Specialists include:

- **Geriatricians**, who manage health care in older adults and know how the body changes as it ages and whether symptoms indicate a serious problem
- **Geriatric psychiatrists**, who specialize in the mental and emotional problems of older adults and can assess memory and thinking problems
- **Neurologists**, who specialize in abnormalities of the brain and central nervous system and can conduct and review brain scans
- **Neuropsychologists**, who can conduct tests of memory and thinking

More information can be found at [info@alz.org](mailto:info@alz.org) or contacting Tribal Health Educators Amber Seymour, [amber.seymour.thp@colvilletribes.com](mailto:amber.seymour.thp@colvilletribes.com) (509) 634-2957 or Greg Marris, [greg.marris@colvilletribes.com](mailto:greg.marris@colvilletribes.com), (509) 634-2092.

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