

## Dementia or Alzheimer's?

According to the National Institute on Aging\*, Alzheimer's disease (AD) is an irreversible, progressive brain disease that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills and, eventually, the ability to carry out the simplest tasks of daily living.

AD is the most common cause of dementia among older people, but it is not a normal part of aging. Dementia refers to a decline in cognitive function that interferes with daily life and activities. This loss in the ability to think, remember, and reason is not a disease itself, but a group of symptoms that often accompanies a disease or condition, including Alzheimer's but also vascular dementia, chronic alcoholism, certain tumors and infections in the brain, and medication side effects.

AD starts in a region of the brain that affects recent memory, then gradually spreads to other parts of the brain. Although treatment can slow the progression of AD and help manage its symptoms in some people, currently there is no cure for this devastating disease. Conditions that cause dementia, on the other hand, may be temporary and reversible—and should be treated by a doctor as soon as possible. Emotional problems, such as stress, anxiety or depression, can make a person more forgetful and can be mistaken for dementia.

Another term to be familiar with is mild cognitive impairment, a condition in which a person has memory problems greater than those expected for his or her age. However, people with MCI do not have the personality changes or cognitive problems that characterize AD.

MCI has several types. The type most associated with memory loss is called amnesic MCI. People with this condition have more memory problems than normal for their age, but their symptoms are not as severe as those of people with AD. More people with MCI go on to develop AD than those without MCI within a certain timeframe. However, not everyone who has MCI develops AD. Studies are underway to learn why some people with MCI progress to AD and others do not.

\* <http://www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/AlzheimersInformation/GeneralInfo/>