

# Getting a Dementia Diagnosis & Next Steps



Receiving a diagnosis of memory impairment can be difficult, but getting accurate information and support can help one understand what to expect and what to do next.

Alzheimer's San Diego offers a variety of programs designed to educate and support those living with or caring for someone with dementia, including classes and workshops, support and discussion groups, social activities, respite, and support from social workers.

Learn more about our free services:  
[www.alzsd.org/services](http://www.alzsd.org/services)

### Diagnosing Dementia

Doctors use several methods and tools to help determine whether a person has a condition contributing to memory impairment. To diagnose types of dementia such as Alzheimer's, doctors may:

- Ask the person and a family member or friend questions about overall health, past medical problems, ability to carry out daily activities, and changes in behavior and personality.
- Conduct tests of memory, problem solving, attention, counting, and language.
- Order 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.

These tests may be repeated to give doctors information about how the person's memory and other cognitive functions are changing over time. Alzheimer's disease can be definitively diagnosed only after death. People with memory and/or cognitive concerns should talk to their doctor to find out whether their symptoms are due to Alzheimer's or another cause, such as stroke, a tumor, Parkinson's disease, sleep disturbances, side effects of medication, or an infection. Some of these conditions may be treatable and possibly reversible. There are also many other dementias besides Alzheimer's, such as vascular dementia.

If the diagnosis is dementia, beginning treatment early in the disease process may help preserve daily functioning for some time, even though the underlying disease process cannot be stopped or reversed. An early diagnosis also helps families plan for the future by taking care of financial and legal matters, addressing potential safety issues, learning about living arrangements, and developing support networks. In addition, an early diagnosis gives people greater opportunities to participate in research or clinical trials that are testing new treatments.

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### Steps to Take After a Diagnosis: A helpful checklist

#### Learn about dementia and local support options:

- Alzheimer's San Diego has many education classes that teach the basics of the disease, how to plan ahead, and what local resources are available. Learn more [www.alzsd.org](http://www.alzsd.org) or by calling 858.492.4400.
- If the person with a new diagnosis or their spouse is a veteran, contact Veteran's Affairs.
- Make regular doctor's appointments for primary care and/or specialist care with a neurologist, neuropsychiatrist, or geriatric psychiatrist.

#### Do some legal, financial, and long-term care planning:

- Make sure legal documents, such as wills, advance healthcare directives, and durable powers of attorney for healthcare and finances, are prepared or updated. To find a lawyer, contact the local bar association, the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys ([www.naela.org](http://www.naela.org)), or Alzheimer's San Diego for more resources.
- Explore getting help to pay for medicines, housing, transportation, and more. Visit the National Council on Aging's Benefits Check Up program at [www.benefitscheckup.org](http://www.benefitscheckup.org).

#### Get help as needed with day-to-day tasks:

- Use simple memory aids like a notepad or sticky notes to jot down reminders, a pillbox to keep medications organized, and a calendar to record appointments.
- Ask family members or friends to help with cooking, paying bills, transportation, or shopping. Local services can also provide support with these tasks; call 211 or visit [www.211.org](http://www.211.org) to find programs in the area.
- Consider using technology solutions for medication management, safety (e.g., emergency response, door alarms), and other care.

#### Be safe at home and on the road:

- If there are concerns about driving, such as confusion, getting lost, or needing a lot of help with directions, talk to the doctor.
- Get a driving evaluation through the Department of Motor Vehicles or other driving programs.
- Speak with Alzheimer's San Diego about local resources, such as free in-home safety evaluations.
- Consider joining MedicAlert® San Diego and enroll in the Take Me Home program if there is a risk of wandering.

#### Consider participating in local research or a clinical trial:

- Contact Alzheimer's San Diego for a current list of research opportunities in San Diego County. (Note: Local studies include everything from drug discovery trials to research measuring caregiver stress.)
- Ask the doctor about trials or studies at local medical centers or universities.
- Search for a clinical trial or study at [www.clinicaltrials.gov](http://www.clinicaltrials.gov). You can also learn more about clinical trials from the National Institutes of Health: [www.nih.gov/health/clinicaltrials](http://www.nih.gov/health/clinicaltrials).

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#### Stay healthy:

- Get regular exercise for a mood boost and to help keep the muscles, joints, and heart healthy.
- Join a gym or a walking group in the neighborhood.
- Eat a well-balanced diet that includes fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- Continue to enjoy visits with family and friends, hobbies, and outings.

#### For those who live alone:

- Identify someone who can visit regularly and be an emergency contact.
- Order an emergency response system if there is a risk of falls. These systems provide a special pendant or bracelet to summon help in the event of a fall where the phone cannot be reached.
- Consider talking with the doctor about a referral to work with an occupational therapist. This person can help with strategies to stay independent.
- Simplify daily life by sticking with familiar places, people, and routines.

#### For those who are working:

- Consider reducing hours at work or switching to a less demanding position if job performance becomes a challenge.
- Consult the HR department or employee assistance program at work about family leave, disability benefits, and other employee benefits.
- Find out about Social Security disability benefits through the Compassionate Allowances program. Visit [www.ssa.gov/compassionateallowances](http://www.ssa.gov/compassionateallowances) or call 1-800-722-1213 to check eligibility.