

After the diagnosis

Family physicians have an important role in identifying caregiver problems and providing direct and ongoing support to caregivers in their day-to-day role³.

Invariably, patients and families want to know about the progression of the disease, risk factors, and available treatments. As a family physician you can:

- Ensure regular follow-up visits to assess their physical and emotional health and coping skills;
- Provide further communication about the diagnosis and information during the whole course of the disease, particularly when dealing with challenging symptoms;
- Assist caregivers in mobilizing family and friends;
- Facilitate referrals to appropriate services and resources.

Referral to the Alzheimer Society for support and services

After the diagnosis, it is crucial to link the person with dementia with support services earlier in the disease course. For individuals with dementia and their families, support, information and education sessions are offered through the Alzheimer Society as well as other community resources.

Studies demonstrate that modest psychosocial interventions combined with drug therapy are practical and can pay handsome dividends in reducing caregiver depression⁴. Past studies have shown that caregiver health, especially their mental health, is critical to enabling people with Alzheimer's disease to continue living in their own homes. Therefore, improving the mental health of caregivers not only benefits caregivers directly, but it has important implications for people with Alzheimer's disease and for our healthcare system.

³ Caregivers for people with dementia. What is the family physician's role? C.A. Cohen, 2000.

⁴ Caregiver Health: Combining Treatment Approaches to Further Reduce Depression, Mary Mittelman, 2008.

Consensus guidelines on dementia

Experts from the fields of neurology, geriatric medicine, geriatric psychiatry, neuropsychology and family practice reviewed literature, arranged background papers, developed recommendations, and voted on these recommendations. Over the course of one year, each evidence-based set of recommendations was refined, gaining approval by at least 80% of the group.

We invite you to familiarize yourself with these recommendations and the evidence-based support behind them in the hope they will help to improve medical practice and dementia care in Canada. www.cccdt.ca.

Visit the Physician's corner

Dementia management is not the sole responsibility of health practitioners. The Alzheimer Society is here to help. The Alzheimer Society offers helpful peer-reviewed literature and professional and community resources.

These are available for download on the Alzheimer Society website:

www.alzheimer.ca/english/disease/physicianscorner.htm

Information includes:

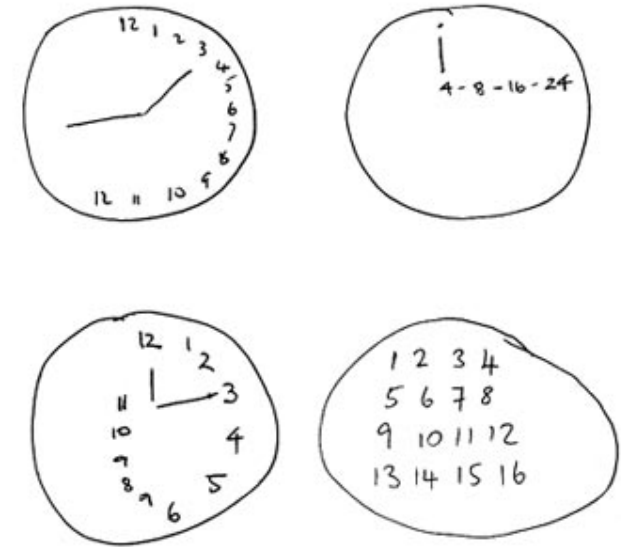
- Recommended Cognitive Screening Tests
- Questions to ask when cognitive impairment is suspected
- Principles of a dignified diagnosis
- Alzheimer's disease progression series
- Tools and resources for post-diagnosis follow-up
- Other useful websites

The Alzheimer Society strongly recommends that people who are concerned about their memory and cognitive health see their family physician. Those who do not have a family doctor should contact their local Alzheimer Society to learn more about the disease, and how to find resources for appropriate diagnosis, treatment and care within their community.

Alzheimer Society

Alzheimer's disease and related dementias

The importance of early diagnosis



Clock drawing test result indicative of dementia. (Institute of Psychiatry, London, UK)

Alzheimer Society of Canada
20 Eglinton West, Suite 1600. Toronto, Ontario, M4R 1K8
T: 416-488-8772 / 1-800-616-8816 - F: 416-488-3778
www.alzheimer.ca

Facts



- Today, **half a million** Canadians have Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia.
- **71,000** of them are under **65**.
- Today, **1 in 11** of Canada's seniors has Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia.
- **50%** more Canadians and their families could be facing Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia in just **5 years**.
- If nothing changes, **over 1 million** Canadians will have Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia within **25 years**.
- Within a **generation**, the number of Canadians with Alzheimer's disease will more than **double**.

Alzheimer's disease and related dementias

- *Alzheimer's disease is the leading form of dementia.* It currently represents **64%** of all dementias. This will increase to **68%** by year **2034**, i.e. within a generation.
- *Vascular dementia is the second most common form of dementia.* It currently represents **20%** of all dementias and will continue to do so within a generation.

Alzheimer's disease - a gender specific illness?

- Today, women represent **72%** of all cases of Alzheimer's disease.
- In the context of overall dementia, women represent **62%** of cases.
- Women represent **47%** of vascular dementia cases.

*With Canada's aging population, the Alzheimer Society predicts that within **5 years**, an additional **250,000** people could be diagnosed with Alzheimer's or a related disease.*

Encouraging early diagnosis

Less than 25% are diagnosed¹

Despite the changing profile of dementia in Canada, the stereotype persists that Alzheimer's disease strikes only the elderly.

Yet we know early detection of dementia is critical as it provides an opportunity for the individual to adjust to the diagnosis and to participate actively in planning for the future which can reduce the heavy societal costs associated with institutionalization.

The story of Jim Mann

In 2007, Jim Mann, a former airline employee who had travelled the world, froze in the middle of a small regional airport in the United States. He had no idea where he was, or what to do next.

After a few tests, Jim's doctor told him he had dementia. After more rigorous testing, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia. He was 58 years old.

Jim was lucky. He had been seeing the same doctor for years. When he described his symptoms, the doctor knew they were unusual for Jim. When he went for more extensive testing, however, one specialist questioned the diagnosis, saying, "You don't look like you have Alzheimer's disease".

"I wasn't sure how I was supposed to look", says Jim. "Since then, I've been told I'm too young, too healthy, too capable, to have the disease. It can be a hidden illness for years, but when you have it, the impact is unquestionable."

He recommends being persistent to get the answers needed. "When you know something is wrong, it's important to push until you are satisfied."

"The answer may be frightening, but it's better to have a diagnosis, find out what help is available and have time to plan for the future with family members and caregivers."

Jim Mann



Assessing patients with cognitive impairment

Early detection of cognitive impairment

Although primary care physicians are in an ideal position to diagnose dementia, cognitive impairment is often unrecognized by family physicians (Iliffe & Manthorpe, 2002). Many barriers to recognition have been identified, including lack of time and ability to screen for dementia (Chodosh et al., 2004), lack of knowledge about dementia (Barrett, Haley, Harrell, & Powers, 1997), lack of symptom recognition (Woods et al., 2003), and belief that early detection increases patient and caregiver distress (Iliffe & Manthorpe, 2004).

Dr. Mario Masselis and Dr. Sandra Black developed a tool outlining questions to help family physicians detect early signs of dementia² entitled [Questions to ask when dementia is suspected](http://www.alzheimer.ca/english/disease/physicianscorner.htm) (available for download at www.alzheimer.ca/english/disease/physicianscorner.htm).

A dignified diagnosis

The process for diagnostic disclosure for people with cognitive impairment or dementia must begin as soon as the possibility of cognitive impairment is suspected.

It is the right of people with dementia to receive a dignified diagnosis. People with dementia wrote a statement called "The principles of a dignified diagnosis" about their experience of receiving a diagnosis and how to make it better. Although this document was initially intended for people with Alzheimer's disease, the principles of a dignified diagnosis are helpful in the diagnosis of all forms of dementia.

The statement [Principles of a dignified diagnosis](http://www.alzheimer.ca/english/disease/physicianscorner.htm) is available for download at www.alzheimer.ca/english/disease/physicianscorner.htm

¹ *Rising Tide: The Impact of Dementia on Canadian Society*, Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2009.

² "Assessing patients complaining of memory impairment", *Geriatrics & Aging* (April 08, volume 11, number 3), Dr. M. Masellis and Dr. S. E. Black.