

Alzheimer's vs. other dementias: What's the difference?

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Imagine struggling to remember your loved ones, the places you've been

or even your own name. The haunting reality of Alzheimer's disease and dementia is a terrifying prospect for many individuals and their families.

Alzheimer's disease, a type of [dementia](#), gradually erodes memory, thinking and behavior, reaching a point where it hinders the simplest daily tasks. However, dementia is a broader term encompassing conditions characterized by significant memory loss and cognitive decline, which profoundly impact daily life. In this article, experts will explore the differences between Alzheimer's and dementia, shedding light on these complex neurological disorders that affect millions worldwide.

What is Alzheimer's?

"There are several different forms of dementia," [Dr. Andrew Segovia Kulik](#), chair of the behavioral health department at Saint Anthony Hospital in Chicago, told *HealthDay*. "Alzheimer's, vascular, Lewy body, etc., are all forms, but the most common form accounting for 70% of all dementias is the Alzheimer's type."

Alzheimer's disease, according to the Alzheimer's Association, is a specific type of dementia that primarily [targets memory, thinking and behavior](#). As the condition progresses, its symptoms intensify, ultimately interfering with an individual's ability to carry out daily tasks.

However, it is crucial to dispel a common misconception that Alzheimer's is typical with aging. While advancing age is the most significant known risk factor, with most cases occurring in individuals aged 65 and older, it can also affect younger individuals, known as early-onset Alzheimer's.

What are the symptoms of Alzheimer's?

Recognizing the signs of Alzheimer's disease is crucial for early detection and intervention. Understanding these symptoms can help individuals and their loved ones seek appropriate medical attention and support.

Here are some common signs of Alzheimer's disease, as outlined by the [National Institute on Aging](#):

- Memory loss that disrupts [daily life](#), such as forgetting recently acquired information, important dates or events, or repeatedly asking for the same information.
- Challenges in [problem-solving](#), planning or completing familiar tasks including managing finances, following a recipe or driving to a familiar location.
- Difficulty with time or spatial orientation, including losing track of dates, seasons or the passage of time, or getting lost in familiar places.
- Changes in [visual perception](#), such as difficulty reading, judging distances, or identifying colors or contrast.
- New problems with words, such as struggling to join or follow a conversation, experiencing a sudden pause while speaking and being unable to find the right words.
- Misplacing items and being unable to retrace steps to find them, often accusing others of stealing.
- Decreased or poor judgment, such as making questionable financial decisions or neglecting personal hygiene.
- Social withdrawal or changes in personality, such as becoming irritable, suspicious, fearful or easily upset in unfamiliar situations.
- Gradual or significant changes in mood or behavior, including confusion, depression, anxiety or unexplained anger.

Can Alzheimer's be treated?

Addressing the treatment options for Alzheimer's disease is a topic of great importance. While there are no medications to halt the progression of dementia directly, according to Kulik, there are ways to approach the underlying problems and mitigate risk factors.

"Although there are a few medications that claim to slow the progression of dementia, none have robust outcomes, and I personally do not have much faith in current, direct medications available," Kulik said.

As such, the focus shifts to treating underlying issues and avoiding risk factors associated with dementia. These [risk factors](#) for Alzheimer's disease, according to [Alzheimer's Disease International](#), include:

- High blood pressure and hypertension
- Air pollution
- Head injury
- Smoking
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Physical inactivity
- Social isolation
- Depression
- Diabetes
- Less education

Kulik emphasized that adopting a healthy lifestyle can play a significant role in preventing dementia. This includes maintaining good nutrition, refraining from excessive alcohol consumption and smoking, and exercising regularly. Additionally, puzzles, reading or learning new skills can provide protective effects. Furthermore, managing [high blood pressure](#) or diabetes through appropriate medications can also reduce the

risk of developing Alzheimer's.

While there may not be a cure for Alzheimer's, a multifaceted approach focusing on overall well-being and addressing related health concerns offers hope in managing the disease and potentially slowing its progression. Individuals must consult [health care professionals](#) for personalized guidance and support in navigating the available treatment options.

Can medications treat Alzheimer's?

According to the U.S. National Institute on Aging, Alzheimer's disease is complex. It is [unlikely that any drug or other intervention will ever successfully treat it](#) in all people with the disease. However, Kulik noted, "A few medications that have shown some benefit over the years have included donepezil [Aricept], rivastigmine [Exelon], galantamine [Razadyne], and memantine [Namenda]. However, the long-term, maintained benefit is marginal, at best, so many practitioners do not routinely prescribe these medications."

Two other drugs, Aduhelm and Leqembi, were given accelerated approval more recently by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, despite lingering concerns over the safety of the drugs and their high price tags.

Living with Alzheimer's is a challenging journey

Living with Alzheimer's disease is a challenging journey, not only for the individuals diagnosed but also for their family members and caregivers. The Alzheimer's Association stresses that [some days are better than others, and the experiences and abilities of those with Alzheimer's can fluctuate](#).

SOURCE: Andrew Segovia Kulik, chair, behavioral health department, Saint Anthony Hospital, Chicago

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