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What's in an Alzheimer's test?



There is no single test that can determine if a person has Alzheimer's disease. But a combination of several different tests can identify if memory and thinking problems are due to one of the many conditions that result in symptoms of dementia.

By process of elimination, doctors can determine what may be the root cause of thinking problems. Some conditions are treatable. Others are not.

Advantages to getting tested early. If changes in memory and thinking are getting in the way of doing what you need or want to do in your life, ask your doctor for a checkup. Even if the source of your problem is not curable, getting a diagnosis as soon as possible has benefits. You can make lifestyle changes that might help slow disease progression and take advantage of medications that can lessen troublesome symptoms. You also become eligible to participate in clinical trials, which puts you in line for cutting-edge treatment. And knowing sooner rather than later gives you time to prioritize what you want to do in the near future, and to complete paperwork and make plans with your family about your wishes for later in the disease.

The components of a full evaluation. To get a complete picture of your brain's health, figure on visits with several different specialists, each providing a unique perspective.

- **Medical history and physical exam.** Your primary doctor will check your heart, hearing, vision, and medications, as well as do a quick memory screening. Expect to discuss your symptoms, your medical history, and your family's. Also, your lifestyle habits such as exercise and alcohol and recreational drug use.
- **Lab tests.** Typically, this involves blood work and a urinalysis. Bladder and kidney problems can point to conditions other than Alzheimer's that trigger memory issues. Lab work will assess thyroid, liver, and kidney function and screen for infections anywhere in the body. Genetic tests may be offered, but they are controversial at this stage because they provide nothing conclusive. Just probabilities.
- **Brain imaging.** A neurologist may order a CT scan, MRI, or PET scan to look for structural changes in the brain. Perhaps you have had a small stroke or several mini-strokes. There may be bleeding, a tumor, or excess fluid in the brain.
- **Tests of your thinking and mental health.** Dementia and depression each cause fuzzy thinking and memory loss. Testing by a neuropsychologist can zero in on the distinction, which is key to finding the correct treatment. The exams are mostly question-and-answer tests or puzzles. They assess arithmetic, memory, concentration, language, problem solving, and spatial recognition skills.

Are you worried you have Alzheimer's?

Let us guide you through the screening process. Call 206-456-5155.



Aging Wisdom —
Your Experts in
Aging Well

206-456-5155

Aging Wisdom supports individuals and families in King and south Snohomish Counties as they plan for aging.

Give us a call at 206-456-5155 to find out how we can support you.