

**Health Mart Pharmacist Column**  
**ALZHEIMER'S AND THE HOLIDAYS**  
**Annie Stuart**

It's been a while since you've made it home for a visit and lots has changed. Your niece has shot up. Your uncle has finally found a diet that works. And your dad. . . . Is it just your imagination, or is he endlessly repeating himself?

Bridging time and distance during the holidays can have an advantage, other than reconnecting family members. If you have elderly relatives, it may give you an opportunity to check for early warning signs of Alzheimer's disease. During the holidays, you may see behaviors that others are too close to see at a time when behaviors may get worse from the presence of houseguests and changes in routine.<sup>1</sup>

With no known cause, Alzheimer's is a disorder of the brain's nerve cells that impairs memory, behavior, and judgment. It eventually leads to death. The number of Americans with Alzheimer's has more than doubled since 1980 and could grow to as many as 16 million by 2050.<sup>2</sup> With so many afflicted, few families will go untouched. While home for the holidays, what should you look for?

First, don't confuse Alzheimer's with run-of-the-mill forgetfulness. It's normal to occasionally forget a name or telephone number. But the person with Alzheimer's will forget them more often and will not remember them, even when prompted. The same question may get asked over and over again. With Alzheimer's, your mother might do perfectly fine preparing a holiday meal that's safely stored in long-term memory, but not remember going out for breakfast earlier in the day—a function of short-term memory.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to Alzheimer's, appearances matter. Since you arrived home, has your grandmother worn the same outfit three days in a row?<sup>3</sup> Did she insist on going to the Christmas play with pajamas underneath her overcoat? Is her normally immaculate yard in disarray?<sup>3</sup> Or, is she storing things in unusual places—the eggnog in the closet or the iron in the refrigerator?

Check for other changes in behavior. What about the condition of your father's checkbook? Is he consistently paying bills late?<sup>3</sup> Let him lead on a walk to the corner store to see if he gets disoriented in familiar territory. Observe whether or not he's lost interest in a lifelong hobby or the holiday traditions that normally energize him. Does your gentle-hearted, soft-spoken father show rapid mood swings when ornaments fall off the tree or extreme fearfulness when asked a simple question?<sup>4</sup>

These may all be signs of Alzheimer's. Some can be signs of other problems, as well, such as depression. The only way to know for sure is to have your loved one checked by a doctor. Don't wait.

Depending upon your relationship, you might set aside a time to go with your relative. That way, you can ask questions that concern you. If that's not possible, talk with the doctor on the phone. Or have someone stay in the waiting room while you slip in to talk with the doctor after the exam. If your loved one is resistant to going at all, try another approach. Ask her to do it for you because you're worried and live far away. Or suggest that both parents get checked at the same time to help normalize the experience.<sup>3</sup>

If your loved one is diagnosed with Alzheimer's, medications won't cure the disease, but they can enhance his or her quality of life.

## **SOURCES**

1. <http://www.healthatoz.com/healthatoz/Atoz/dc/caz/neur/alzh/alert122019992.jsp>
2. <http://www.alz.org/aboutad/statistics.asp>
3. Examples provided by Cindy Kaufmann, Institute on Aging
4. <http://www.alz.org/aboutad/warning.asp>