After the diagnosis

Referral to the Alzheimer Society for support and services

People diagnosed with dementia, their families and the health-care providers who support them all recognize that early access to ongoing, reliable support and information is critical when living with the many challenges that dementia brings.

To address this need, the Alzheimer Society developed First Link®, a referral program for physicians, health and community services providers that connects individuals and their families to learning, services and support as early as possible in the disease process.

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

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;
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Alzheimer's disease and other dementias

- Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia are two common forms of dementia.
- There are many other dementias including Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia (including Pick's disease), Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and mixed dementia.

Dementia numbers in Canada¹

- 564,000 Canadians are living with dementia right now
- 65% of Canadians over the age of 65 who have dementia are women
- 25,000 new cases of dementia are diagnosed each year in Canada
- 937,000 Canadians will be living with dementia in 15 years
- The average family physician in Canada has 30 to 40 patients with dementia
- $10.4 billion is spent by Canadians annually to care for people with dementia
- Smoking increases the risk of having dementia by 45%

Encouraging early diagnosis

Benefits of early diagnosis

- Early diagnosis allows people with dementia and their families to receive timely practical information, advice and support. Only through receiving a diagnosis can they access available drug and non-drug therapies that may improve their cognition and enhance their quality of life².
- Early therapeutic interventions can be effective in improving cognitive function, treating depression, improving caregiver mood, and delaying institutionalization. Some of these interventions may be more effective when started earlier in the disease course³.
- Undetected dementia places older adults at risk for delirium, motor vehicle accidents, medication errors, and financial difficulties to name a few⁴.
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Jim Mann

Former Board Member, Alzheimer Society of Canada.

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Although primary care physicians are in an ideal position to diagnose dementia, cognitive impairment is often unrecognized by family physicians. Many barriers to recognition have been identified, such as lack of knowledge about dementia, lack of symptom recognition and belief that early detection increases patient and caregiver distress⁶.

The major hurdles to diagnosing dementia in family practice are:

- the complexity of the diagnostic process;
- physicians’ lack of familiarity with dementia screening;
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To address these challenges, Drs. Masellis and Black developed a tool outlining questions to help family physicians detect early signs of dementia entitled Questions to ask when dementia is suspected⁸, available for download from our For health-care professionals section at www.alzheimer.ca.

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**While rare, 16,000 Canadians under the age of 65 are living with dementia. These individuals face additional challenges as they may still be in the workforce, have considerable financial commitments and dependent children. A timely diagnosis of young onset dementia is an important prerequisite for beginning adequate treatment, planning for the future, and accessing support services appropriate for that age group.**

**Source:** Prevalence and Monetary Costs of Dementia in Canada, Alzheimer Society of Canada (2016).

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