

FACT SHEET: BENEFITS OF EARLY DIAGNOSIS SURVEY

Alzheimer Awareness Month - January 2012

Let's face it! Get the facts. Know for sure.

Early diagnosis, earlier intervention, better treatment

About the survey

In October 2011 the Alzheimer Society commissioned a nationally representative online survey to determine how long people wait after noticing symptoms before seeing a doctor; their reasons for not seeking a diagnosis and their awareness of the benefits of an early diagnosis.

958 Canadian caregivers of people living with Alzheimer's disease or other dementia responded to the survey. Participants were between the ages of 45 and 65 and were evenly split between males and females. The survey focused on their knowledge of the warning signs of dementia and their willingness to seek a diagnosis.

Key findings

Low awareness of the early signs of Alzheimer's disease and dementia causes a delay in diagnosis and a subsequent treatment gap for people with dementia.

- Almost half (44 per cent) of respondents waited a year and 16 per cent of these waited two years or more before seeing a doctor because they thought their symptoms were just the signs of "old age," or would go away
- 39 per cent thought their symptoms were episodic or said they didn't take them seriously enough.
- Over a quarter of the people with the symptoms refused to see their doctor or saw no need to go unless symptoms grew worse.

Three quarters of survey respondents wished they had known sooner.

- The most important reason for getting an earlier diagnosis was access to medications to minimize symptoms.
- Other reasons given were more time to prepare for the future and ability to understand what was happening to the person with dementia.

Memory loss continues to be the most frequently mentioned symptom, but others symptoms are also significant.

- 75 per cent of respondents listed "frequent memory loss" as one of the early signs.
- Close to two thirds (65 per cent) also listed disorientation of time and place, such as getting lost in familiar places or not knowing what month or year it is.
- Close to two thirds (64 per cent) listed changes in personality or acting out of character, like becoming suspicious, fearful or confused.

Family doctors play an essential role in getting an early diagnosis.

- 83 per cent of respondents visited their family doctor first.
- Half (49 per cent) of these were diagnosed by the family doctor.
- Half (51 per cent) were diagnosed within six months.

Alzheimer Society is a key support for people with dementia and their caregivers.

- Satisfaction levels with the caring manner and helpfulness of the Alzheimer Society were very high, ranging from 88 per cent to 93 per cent satisfaction with programs, information and materials and staff.

Summary

With its landmark report *Rising Tide: the Impact of Dementia on Canadian Society* in 2010, the Alzheimer Society issued a wake-up call about the escalating prevalence of Alzheimer's disease and dementia and the rising economic and social costs to Canada's health-care system and Canadian families.

Early detection is one solution to minimize this trend. Yet too many Canadians are not taking advantage of early treatment and support services or the chance to make key decisions about their future medical, financial and legal needs because they are diagnosed in the later stages of the disease, if at all.

The survey clearly calls for greater promotion of the early signs of dementia and the benefits of early detection to break down barriers such as fear, ignorance and stigma.

Greater awareness also is critical to bridge the gap between available services and treatment to live better and more independently with the disease and plan for the future.

The Alzheimer Society encourages Canadians to take advantage of practical information and other support services it offers in more than 150 communities across the country.

The Society is also working with the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC) to build on awareness as well as physicians' capacity to diagnose and treat through greater collaboration and integration of health and community partnerships.