

Visiting the Neurologist

A neurologist is a medical doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating disorders that affect the central nervous system, including the brain and spinal cord. A neurological exam may be necessary to identify conditions that might be affecting your loved one.

One simple diagnostic test cannot identify Alzheimer's disease. Doctors must gather a detailed history of the person, and then complete several different medical tests, such as:

- Physical exam
- Lab tests of blood and urine
- Neurological exam of nervous system and brain functioning
- Psychiatric assessment of mental health and cognitive skills

A family doctor or a team of medical professionals may perform the diagnostic tests. The team may include these professionals:

- Physician, usually an internist or geriatrician
- Neurologist
- Psychiatrist
- Nurse
- Social Worker

Geriatric Assessment Programs are available in many cities and can help with conditions that are medically complex, behavior oriented, or when an in-home assessment is necessary. Please refer to the tipsheet on Geriatric Assessment Programs for more information.

Preparing for a visit to a neurologist

- **Find a neurologist.**
Your family doctor or primary care physician may be able to refer you to a neurologist. The Alzheimer's Association provides a list of neurologists in the St. Louis metropolitan area. Make sure the neurologist you choose is covered by your loved one's health insurance. Most health insurance companies require a referral before they will pay for a neurology exam.
- **Make an appointment.**
It takes a week to several months to get an initial visit appointment with many neurologists.
- **Keep a diary or journal of physical or mental complaints.**
What symptoms have you noticed? When did the changes first appear? How have the symptoms changed over time?

What should you expect at the neurologist's office visit?

The office visit may take 30 to 45 minutes. Remember to allow time for travel and getting to the office in plenty of time for the appointment. Your loved one should be well rested for the best chance at cooperation and attention during the visit. The neurologist will perform several different kinds of evaluations.

- **Physical and mental health history**

The neurologist will review the medical history and medications your loved one takes. He or she will ask about physical and mental symptoms and whether there has been any treatment. The neurologist may request medical records from your loved one's primary care physician.

- **Mental status**

Neurologists use questionnaires and rating scale tests to evaluate mental status. The mental status exam may include:

- 20-30 questions on each test
- Standard questions about current events and common situations
- Drawing or counting items
- Tests of ability to perform routine activities

- **Cranial nerves**

The neurologist may do some eye tests, similar to those done by eye doctors. Other tests include touching the face and asking your loved one to stick out the tongue or swallow. The neurologist may also test hearing and the sense of smell.

- **Motor system**

This exam tests muscle tone and strength. Your loved one may need to undress and put on a gown. The neurologist looks at muscles and asks for certain actions such as raising the arms with palms up. The neurologist may perform resistance tests, asking your loved one to push or pull.

- **Sensory system**

The neurologist tests sensations such as temperature, pain, pressure, and position. For example, the neurologist may lightly touch an arm with a pin to judge sensation. To evaluate position, the neurologist may ask your loved one to close his or her eyes and tell if a big toe is up or down.

- **Deep tendon reflexes**

The neurologist tests reflexes by tapping parts of the legs and arms with a soft rubber hammer, then watching to see how tendons move.

- **Coordination**

The neurologist asks for point-to-point movements, such as moving a finger from the person's nose to the neurologist's finger and back, going as quickly as possible.

- **Gait**

The neurologist may observe how your loved one walks.

- **Lab tests and other diagnostic procedures**

The neurologist may order blood and urine tests if they have not already been done by the primary care doctor. The neurologist may also order a CAT scan (computed axial tomography) or an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging). These tests use high technology equipment and are painless.

What's next?

You may have to wait several days or weeks for the results of all the neurology tests. If the tests identify a problem, the neurologist may require more tests or followup visits.

- Your loved one should be reassessed every 6 months or with any sudden decline or change in behavior.
- The neurologist may recommend treatment such as referral to adult day services or support organizations, modification of living environment and activities, or medications.

You and your loved one will need to decide the best way to handle the neurologist's recommendations. Remember, the Alzheimer's Association has a 24-hour Helpline to assist families and individuals diagnosed with dementia. Resources and support services are available. Please call **(800) 272-3900** any time you need us or visit us online at www.alz.org/stl.