

Sharing a Diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease

Sharing a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease with a patient is never easy. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* has compiled a list of techniques that physicians have found helpful in this difficult communication process:

- Meet with your patient in a quiet, private location.
- If your patient agrees, have a significant support person present.
- When communicating the diagnosis, sit close to the person and make eye contact. Avoid having tables or other physical barriers between you and the patient.
- Strive for a warm, caring tone.
- Give a “warning shot,” such as, “I have some bad news to share today.” Depending on the circumstances, the discussion about bringing a support person to the appointment may also serve as a warning shot.
- Use straightforward language, avoiding euphemisms and medical jargon. Such communication might include the following:
 - I think your symptoms are probably due to Alzheimer's disease.
 - In Alzheimer's disease, the cells in your brain very gradually start to fail. Eventually, the cells begin to die. This brain failure is what's causing your symptoms.
 - Try not to be ashamed or embarrassed about your symptoms. This is a physical illness just like heart disease or arthritis.
 - In most cases, we do not know what causes Alzheimer's. We wish we did. Researchers all over the world are trying to figure this out.
 - We cannot cure Alzheimer's disease, but we will work together to make your life as good as it can be. People can enjoy many years of good life after finding out that they have Alzheimer's.
 - Over time, your Alzheimer's disease will gradually get worse. This usually happens very slowly. We will talk about changes you can implement to make life with Alzheimer's easier and to keep you safe. We will also discuss some things for you to think about in the future.
- Acknowledge and explore the patient's and support person's reactions, allowing for emotional expression and time for questions.
- Find out what the patient and/or support person already know. Follow their signals in deciding how much detail to provide.
- Summarize the discussion. Tell the patient how to contact the Alzheimer's Association and other community agencies that offer helpful information, counseling, support and services.