

Tests to Confirm a Diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease

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What Tests to Expect

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You Can Take Action

A confirmed Alzheimer's diagnosis requires a brain scan called a PET scan, which helps doctors see how the brain is functioning. However, because PET scans are expensive and may not always be available, doctors usually start with other tests to assess memory and brain function. Below, you can learn about other types of tests that are accessible to you.

Medical History and Exam A The first step in diagnosing Alzheimer's is talking to your doctor about your medical history. As a patient, you have the right to receive a cognitive test during your Medicare Annual Wellness visit. If your doctor does not suggest one, you can request it. If you show signs of cognitive impairment during a routine visit, Medicare covers a separate visit to more thoroughly assess your cognitive function and develop a care plan. (6)

Your doctor will ask about your symptoms, how long you've had them, and how they affect your daily life. It's a good idea to have a family member or friend with you to provide more information. 1 Then, a doctor will conduct a physical exam to check your reflexes, muscle strength, vision, hearing, coordination, and balance.

Next, the doctor will perform mental status tests to assess your memory and other thinking skills. These tests can be brief or more detailed, depending on the information needed. They help compare your mental function to others of a similar age and education level and may be done over multiple visits by a specialist, such as a neurologist or neuropsychiatrist, or at a memory clinic instead of your regular doctor.

Lab tests, including blood work, help rule out other conditions that might cause similar symptoms, such as thyroid disorders or low vitamin B-12 levels. Advanced blood tests can now measure levels of beta-amyloid and tau proteins, which are associated with Alzheimer's disease. However, these newer tests are not yet widely available, may not be covered by insurance, and may not perform well for all racial and ethnic groups. (3) Current blood tests for Alzheimer's may work better for white individuals than for Black, Hispanic, and Asian individuals. Studies show that some groups, especially Hispanic people with memory problems, have lower levels of amyloid, which these tests look for. More research is needed to make sure the tests work well for everyone. (5)

People of color should ask for care that respects their culture. When advocating for better Alzheimer's tests for Black or Hispanic individuals, doctors should consider cultural differences, language issues, and racial biases, while making sure people have access to the right resources and doctors.

Understanding Memory Tests: What They Can and Can't Do

There is no single best test for checking memory and thinking skills, and no test is accepted by everyone.

The Mini-COG and MoCA tests are two of the most common, but all tests have problems, especially for people from different cultural backgrounds or languages. For example, if a test asks someone to name an animal they've never seen before, it won't be very useful.

Brain Imaging Scans

Brain imaging plays an important role in diagnosing Alzheimer's. Here are some common tests: 1,4

- **Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI):** An MRI uses a strong magnetic field and radio waves to take detailed pictures of your brain. It can show if parts of your brain are shrinking, which is a common sign of Alzheimer's.
- **Computerized Tomography (CT) Scan:** A CT scan uses X-rays to take cross-sectional pictures of your brain. While it's not as detailed as an MRI, it can still help rule out other conditions.
- **Positron Emission Tomography (PET) Scans:** PET scans show areas of your brain where energy is not being used properly. This can indicate areas affected by Alzheimer's.
- **Amyloid PET Scans:** Amyloid PET scans look specifically for amyloid plaques in your brain, which are a sign of Alzheimer's.

Why These Tests Matter

While many of these tests are safe, minimally invasive, and offer invaluable insight, it's important to understand that Alzheimer's diagnosis is not based on one single test.

It involves a comprehensive assessment of symptoms, medical history, lab results, and brain imaging. Getting a diagnosis is important for understanding the cause of your or your loved one's brain health concerns. It is important so you can get the right support and care.

Changed this language because some of these tests can be invasive or somewhat unsafe – like a spinal tap.

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