Alzheimer's: Don't ignore these early warning signs

IT'S CRUCIAL TO CONSULT A DOCTOR IF YOU NOTICE THESE SYMPTOMS ARE INTERFERING WITH DAILY LIFE. BY

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A QUICK, three-minute brainwave test could help detect early memory issues linked to Alzheimer's disease well before a clinical diagnosis is typically possible, a new study has found.



Developed at the University of Bath, the test – called Fastball – uses EEG technology to monitor brain activity via sensors placed on the scalp.

The study, published in the journal Brain Communications and led by researchers from the Universities of Bath and Bristol, involved 106 participants: 52 with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) – a decline in memory or thinking skills – and 54 healthy older adults. MCI can be an early indicator of Alzheimer's, though not all cases progress to the disease.

Results showed that individuals with amnestic MCI – a form marked by noticeable memory loss – had significantly weaker responses to the Fastball test compared to those with non-amnestic MCI or no cognitive issues.

As research in early detection continues to develop, experts from Dementia UK and Alzheimer's Society here share some of the most common early signs of Alzheimer's to look out for, and talk about the crucial impact early diagnosis can have.

Although everyone's experience of Alzheimer's is unique, here are some common early signs of the disease that you shouldn't ignore...

1. Memory problems

"The first noticeable sign of Alzheimer's disease is often memory problems, such as difficulties recalling recent events and learning new information," says Dr Simon Wheeler, senior know-

ledge officer at Alzheimer's Society.
"This happens because one of the first parts of the brain to be damaged by Alzheimer's is often the hippocampus, which has an important role in forming new memories.
"The person is much less able to remember things that have happened recently, but may still have excellent memories of events that happened a long time ago though – at least during the early stages."
2. Thinking and reasoning difficulties
"Alzheimer's disease also affects thinking and reasoning abilities. A person may also have difficulty concentrating or following a conversation," says Dr Wheeler.
Everyday problems that used to be easy to think through become more challenging over time.
"Tasks that involve a series of steps, such as cooking a meal or making a hot drink, may get muddled up and be done in the wrong order," says Dr Wheeler.
"All of this leads to confusion, frustration and a gradual loss of independence."
3. Language problems
"One aspect of Alzheimer's that most people don't know about is how it affects language," highlights Dr Wheeler. "Most commonly it involves struggling to find the right words.
"For example, a person may pause while they try to think of the word they want to use.
"It can feel like the word is on the 'tip of their tongue' but then it doesn't come to them. This can also happen with names of people or places."
Although this is something that we all experience from time to time when we are tired or distracted, Dr Wheeler says that it can become quite noticeable in people living with Alzheimer's.
"They may say 'thingy' or similar filler words, even when the word they're looking for is a fairly basic one," adds Dr Wheeler.
4. Mood changes
"Many people with Alzheimer's disease become anxious, irritable, sad or frightened," says Dr Wheeler. "They may lose interest in talking to others, or in the activities and hobbies they used to enjoy, resulting in them becoming more withdrawn over time. It's often hard to say if these changes in mood are caused by the disease itself or the frustrations of struggling with everyday tasks because of their symptoms."
5. Changes to how things are seen and heard (perception)
"Some people with Alzheimer's may also struggle to judge distances and see the outline of objects. This can make using stairs or parking a car much harder, for example," says Dr Wheeler.
"They may also find certain noises uncomfortable or upsetting, such as loud music or lots of people in a room talking at the same time."
When should you seek advice from a professional about these symptoms?
"If you are concerned about symptoms of dementia such as changes in your memory, communication, personality or behaviour or have worries about these changes in someone close to you, it is important to consult a GP as soon as possible," says Kirsty Dallison-Perry, head of consultant admiral nurse services at Dementia UK.
"This means that other conditions with similar symptoms to dementia can be ruled out and, if necessary, further assessments can be carried out so an accurate diagnosis can be made and the

right support put in place."

Why is an early diagnosis for Alzheimer's disease so important?

Seeking a diagnosis of dementia can be frightening or overwhelming, but here are some reasons why it is important to get a diagnosis as soon as possible...

Can help manage and treat symptoms more effectively

"Although there is no cure for dementia at present, medication and other interventions may be used to help manage and reduce the symptoms in some types of dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease," says Kirsty.

"These are most effective if started as early as possible."

Prompts a plan of action

"A diagnosis can help the person with dementia and their family get the best support and put future plans in place," says Kirsty.

"This includes looking at their finances, considering important legal issues and making decisions about the present and the future."

Provides an explanation

"Some people find it a relief to have an explanation for why their memory, behaviour or emotions are changing," says Kirsty.

Helps loved ones understand

"A diagnosis can benefit the wider family (including children) and friends, and enable them to understand what is happening and how they can help," says Kirsty.

Helps improve quality of life

"A timely diagnosis can help the person stay well for longer by increasing their awareness of the condition and how they and their family can make adjustments to improve their quality of life," says Kirsty.