
Visiting the Psychiatrist

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating mental disorders. Geriatric psychiatrists specialize in working with older adults. A psychiatric assessment may be necessary to identify conditions that might be affecting your loved one.

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is not a mental illness, but it can cause symptoms related to mental health, such as depression, anxiety, agitation, and hallucinations. If your loved one is having any of these symptoms, it may be helpful to have a psychiatric evaluation.

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 (thinking) 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.

Preparing for a visit to a psychiatrist

Find a psychiatrist.

Your family doctor or primary care physician may be able to refer you to a psychiatrist. The Alzheimer's Association also provides a list of psychiatrists in the St. Louis metropolitan area.

Figure out how you will pay for the visit.

Make sure your loved one's health insurance includes the psychiatrist you choose and that the psychiatrist accepts your loved one's health insurance plan. Most health insurance companies require a referral before they will pay for an appointment with a psychiatrist.

Schedule an appointment.

It takes a week to several months to get an initial visit appointment with many psychiatrists.

Keep a diary or journal by writing down physical or mental complaints.

What symptoms or behaviors have you noticed? When did the changes first appear? How have the symptoms changed over time? Your notes will help the psychiatrist make a diagnosis. Write down what

questions do you have for the psychiatrist. The diary or journal will help you and your loved one before and after the first appointment.

Getting your loved one to the appointment.

Many people are hesitant to visit a psychiatrist because they feel that it means that they are “going crazy” and/or they fear that the psychiatrist will force them into institutional care. Some individuals may fear that they will be forced to talk about sensitive or private past experiences. If this is the case, it may be helpful to present the visit as a consultation with a doctor who specializes in caring for older people and medication management. If your loved one has respect for their primary care doctor, it may be helpful to suggest that “the doctor has recommended they see this specialist” to review their medications. Using the term geriatric specialist instead of geriatric psychiatrist may also be helpful if your loved one is worried about visiting a psychiatrist.

What should you expect at the psychiatrist’s office visit?

The first office visit may take 30 to 60 minutes or more. If this amount of time could be a problem, you should tell the scheduler and plan to make two appointments instead of one.

Remember to allow time for travel so that you get 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 psychiatrist will perform several evaluations of your loved one:

- Behavior and appearance
- Mood
- Cognition (memory and thinking)
- Thought processes and content (personal knowledge of time and place)
- Body posture, eye contact, and speech (communication skills)
- Physical functioning (sleep, appetite, and physical symptoms)
- Insight and judgment (decision making)
- Social skills (ability to relate to others and assessment of present relationships)

The psychiatrist may also gather detailed information about your loved one.

- **Physical and mental health history:** The psychiatrist will review the medications your loved one takes and their medical history. He or she will ask about physical and mental symptoms and whether there has been any treatment. The psychiatrist may request medical records from your loved one’s primary care physician.
- **Social history:** The psychiatrist may ask about social history information such as marital status, family composition, education, and employment.
- **Lab tests:** The psychiatrist may order blood tests, urine tests, and brain scans if the primary care doctor or neurologist has not already done them.
- **Mental health tests:** The psychiatrist may use several questionnaires and rating scale tests. These tests usually contain 20-30 short questions each.

When will we know the test results?

The psychiatrist may tell you preliminary results of some of the tests right away, but complete results may take several days.

What’s next?

If the tests identify a problem, the psychiatrist may require more tests or followup visits. Depending on the diagnosis, the psychiatrist may recommend treatment or medication. You may need to consider who will give the medicine to your loved one and who will take your loved one to followup appointments.