

EYE HEALTHCARE

EARLY DIAGNOSIS OF ALZHEIMER'S ?

Alzheimer's is a condition where there is a slow and gradual loss of memory, generally affecting the elderly. It currently affects approx .700,000 people in the UK, and is expected to double in the next 15 years. However, recently a technique pioneered at the University College London can detect early signs of the condition, up to 20 years before any symptoms show.

The British researchers have developed their technique which highlights nerve cell damage in the retina of the eye, which they have proved, correlates exactly to nerve cell damage in the brain. The test is quick, non invasive, inexpensive and simply involves applying eye drops to the eye and taking a photograph with an infra-red camera. The eye drops contain a dye which attaches to dying retinal nerve cells, making them easily visible on the photograph.

It's the relative amount of these cells in a small predisposed area, which allows the extent of early Alzheimer's to be graded. Additionally, the scientists have also pinpointed the precise pattern of retinal cell death characteristic of Alzheimer's with alarming success.

Although, still in its infancy (tested on mice only), patient trials will begin later this year, with the diagnostic equipment available at your Optician's practice within 3-5 years. In the short term, an early diagnosis would give patients and their families much more time to prepare for the future, whilst in the longer term, allow new drugs that stop the disease in its tracks to reach their full potential.

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