**What is First Link?**

First Link is a referral program to assist physicians, health and community service providers to directly refer people living with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias and their families to the Alzheimer Society for services and support at the time of diagnosis and throughout the duration of the disease. Individuals and their families are linked to learning, services and support as early as possible in the disease process.

**Stages of Dementia:**

- **Early or Mid Dementia:** Memory loss and cognitive impairments slowly start to become more noticeable.
- **Middle or Moderate Dementia:** Support will be needed to help manage everyday living.
- **Late or Terminal Dementia:** Person will need more assistance and may no longer be able to live independently.

**How does First Link help?**

It is often difficult for individuals and families affected by dementia to ask for help. Many families are told about the Alzheimer Society and dementia care services, but will not actually make the phone call until a crisis occurs. First Link removes this barrier to support by ensuring that individuals and families are referred directly to First Link at the time of diagnosis or as soon as possible after a diagnosis is made.
Increase Of First Link Referrals Shows Growing Confidence!

From 2011 to 2015, the number of clients referred to First Link grew from 6,300 to 12,700 (Figure 1). The number of clients has more than doubled in the last 4 years and is continuing to increase.¹ This suggests a growing confidence in First Link and Alzheimer Society Services in Ontario.

By creating a more robust partnership between primary care providers and First Link, the Alzheimer Society plays a crucial role in supporting the growing numbers of people with dementia and their unique needs.
Number of Ontarians Diagnosed with Dementia Continues to Increase

Meet Bea, a retired nurse, mother of four, and grandmother of nine. She is one of our most important spokespeople, meeting with politicians, the media or just about anybody who will listen about why we need to act on dementia now! But there’s something else about Bea: she accomplishes this while living with dementia.

Bea teaches us how with the right information and support, people who have this disease can still have full, meaningful lives. She is a success story for what anyone can achieve, despite the difficulties life throws at them.

The number of Ontarians diagnosed with dementia is increasing. Between 2007 and 2013, the number of community-dwelling individuals (40+) with a diagnosis of dementia increased by more than 40%, from 69,050 to 99,330 (Figure 2).\(^2\) In 2016, over 220,000 older adults in Ontario (65+ community and long-term care) are estimated to be living with some form of dementia. This number is expected to **increase by 13%** to nearly one quarter of a million people by 2020.\(^3\)
Referrals From Health Partners Get People To Our Doors Faster

More than half of Alzheimer Society clients are referred by healthcare professionals and other community partners.

A study has shown that people who were referred directly to First Link by healthcare professionals (direct referrals) received services 11 months sooner than clients who accessed the services themselves (self-directed referrals).⁴

In 2015, more than one half of new Alzheimer Society clients were referred by external partners such as geriatric services, community care access centres, community support services and primary care providers.

The charts below (Figure 3) show the overall distribution of new client referrals to the Alzheimer Societies in Ontario in Fiscal 2015.

The number of self-directed referrals saw its first peak in 2012 but was then followed by a decline the year after. 2014 marked the beginning of a large rise in self-directed referrals.

![Figure 3: New Client Referrals to Alzheimer Societies in Ontario](image-url)
Leveraging Primary Care to Expand the Reach of First Link

First Link’s success in Ontario proves the effectiveness of care models based on partnerships between sectors. Healthcare professionals are increasingly recognizing the value of interdisciplinary care, especially for chronic diseases and higher risk populations, such as people with cognitive impairment. A recent study assessing the impact of having Alzheimer Society staff working with nine memory clinics showed:

- Access to community services improved
- Direct referrals to the Alzheimer Society increased fivefold over the six month study period
- The partnerships benefitted all team members

Direct referrals grew **5x more** when Alzheimer Society staff worked with memory clinics.

The growth in direct referrals over the past five years, as seen in the graph below (Figure 4), reflects the Alzheimer Society’s commitment to working with healthcare professionals and community partners and enhancing linkages between sectors.

![Figure 4: Growth in Direct Referrals](chart.png)
FIRST LINK  Growing First Link to meet the needs of an aging Ontario

1 ASiO Common Core Elements year-end report (2014-15)
3 Hopkins, R. Dementia projections for the counties regional municipalities and census divisions of Ontario. PCCC Mental Health Services. Kingston, ON (Jan 2010)
5 Lee, L. et al., Integrating community services into primary care. (2014)

For more information: visit www.firstlinkontario.ca

Alzheimer Society of Ontario
20 Eglinton Ave West,
16th Floor
Toronto, Ontario
M4R 1K8
Tel: 416-967-5900
Fax: 416-967-3826
Email: staff@alzheimeront.org