IS IT POSSIBLE TO PREVENT DEMENTIA?

Millions suffer from dementia. In the U.S. alone, someone develops Alzheimer’s disease every 66 seconds, according to the Alzheimer’s Association. “Memory loss isn’t always a normal part of aging. Dementia diseases should not carry a stigma or taboo,” said Upinder Singh, M.D., Geriatric Medicine Specialist at Southern Hills Hospital and Medical Center. Because no one is immune to developing dementia, it’s important to understand this complicated condition.

WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

Alzheimer’s disease is the most common and well-known type; however, “dementia is a blanket term that describes multiple different conditions that cause cognitive impairment. In all cases, the patient experiences memory loss and the inability to care for themselves eventually, but each type of dementia has its own specific set of symptoms,” Singh said.

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

Properly identifying and diagnosing the type of dementia is important and sometimes difficult. “It’s not uncommon for Alzheimer’s disease to be incorrectly attributed to other types of dementia, or even entirely different conditions. Depression, for instance, can look like Alzheimer’s disease in older patients — it can cause memory loss, confusion and cognitive decline. But depression can be treated effectively when identified early, whereas misidentifying it as Alzheimer’s can make the problem much worse,” Singh said. Certain medications and vitamin deficiencies also can create symptoms similar to those seen with Alzheimer’s. To correctly diagnose dementia, one should rule out other potential conditions. A detailed medical history is necessary, as well as a medical assessment and lab testing (including CT scans and MRIs). Once the patient receives a proper diagnosis, treatment can begin.

“You can’t reverse the process. Treating dementia differs depending on the type. There are, however, medications and therapies that can help improve the patient’s quality of life and potentially slow the decline.”

CAN I PREVENT ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE?

According to the Alzheimer’s Association, it’s the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States. More than 5 million Americans are living with Alzheimer’s, a number that could rise to 16 million by 2050. “It’s a very costly disease that requires full-time care. The burdens it places on the health care industry and families affected are astronomical,” Singh said. While the mechanisms in the brain that cause Alzheimer’s are unknown, the most common risk factors are age, family history and a medical history of heart problems, which affect blood flow to the brain. Without a cure, it’s vital that people plan toward prevention.

WHO HAS ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE OR DEMENTIA

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WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

Vascular dementia occurs as a result of vascular compromise such as stroke.

Lewy Body dementia occurs as a result of nerve cell abnormalities.

Frontotemporal dementia occurs after damage has been sustained to the frontal or temporal lobes of the brain, commonly from traumatic head injuries.

Huntington’s disease occurs when nerve cell abnormalities in the brain cause dementia.

COPING WITH A FAMILY MEMBER

WHO HAS ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE OR DEMENTIA

“Alzheimer’s is a family disease. It affects people in varying ways, and coping with a close family member who is experiencing cognitive decline can be very difficult,” Singh said. The most important fact to remember is that they’re not doing it on purpose, and they’re not crazy. They need support and patience. You cannot change the disease; you can help by adapting to it as best you can.

Singh recommends using “therapeutic lies” when necessary. For example, if a patient with Alzheimer’s is continually asking about his deceased mother, you don’t need to correct him. It may be OK to tell him his mother will call later, or that she left a loving message earlier. Reminding the patient that he loved one is deceased will only upset and confuse him, and it’s not helpful to attempt to reacquaint him with reality in those instances. Singh also urged family members to fight feelings of guilt if they need to put their loved ones in a care home. “It’s not an easy decision, but it has to be done. Your health and emotional wellness are important too.”

STEPS TO HELP

1. Decrease heart stressors.
2. Be proactive about treating/preventing heart disease and diabetes, maintain a healthy weight, decrease alcohol consumption and quit smoking.
3. Maintain daily physical activity.
4. Avoid medications that can affect brain and memory function. These include some sleep medications and frequent use of antihistamines.
5. Keep the brain active by engaging in problem-solving, puzzles, languages, reading and writing.
6. Remain socially active.
7. Avoid processed foods and seek brain-healthy foods such as almonds and walnuts.

TOP TIPS

DECREASE YOUR RISK

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