

- Aging

Dementia not a part of ageing process

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ALZHEIMER'S disease, which is the commonest cause of dementia, is a progressive disease that causes the brain to shrink and brain cells and cell connections to degenerate and die, eventually destroying the memory and other important mental functions.



Memory loss and confusion are the main symptoms. No cure exists but medication and management strategies have proved capable of improving symptoms over the years.

Every year since 1994 World Alzheimer's Day has been commemorated on September 21 to increase awareness of the disease and challenge the stigma that persists around Alzheimer's disease and all types of dementia.

The 2021 theme, 'Know Dementia, Know Alzheimer's,' was continued last Wednesday (September 21) as the 2022 theme, focusing mainly on diagnosing the disease, the warning signs of dementia and the continued effect globally of Covid-19 on those suffering from dementia.

While September 21 is World Alzheimer's Day the month as a whole is being marked as World Alzheimer Month with campaigns throughout the month to increase awareness of the disease.

According to the World Health Organisation's World Alzheimer Report for 2019, many people still wrongly believe that dementia is a normal part of ageing. It is not. This alone highlights the importance of the World Alzheimer's Day and Month in trying to change perceptions and increase existing public knowledge about dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

This year the campaign has a special focus on post-diagnosis support. Following recent developments and potential breakthroughs in both dementia treatment and support, the campaign highlights the importance of support for people living with dementia and their families following a diagnosis.

Causes

Researchers believe Alzheimer's disease probably develops from multiple factors such as genetics, lifestyle and environment.

Scientists have identified factors that increase the risk of Alzheimer's. While some risk factors such as age, family history and heredity cannot be changed, emerging evidence suggests there may be other factors that can influence the disease.

Risk factors

Risk factors include head injury, heart problems and overall unhealthy aging.

Head injury

There is a link between a head injury and the future risk of dementia. It is therefore important to protect your brain from injury by buckling your seatbelt, wearing a helmet when participating in sports where helmets can be worn, wearing a hard hat on construction sites and "fall-proofing" your home.

Heart problems

There is strong evidence linking brain health to heart health. This connection makes sense because the brain is nourished by one of the body's richest networks of blood vessels and the heart is responsible for pumping blood through these blood vessels to the brain.

The risk of developing Alzheimer's or vascular dementia appears to be increased by many conditions that damage the heart and blood vessels. These include heart disease, diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Overall healthy ageing

One promising line of research suggests that strategies for overall healthy aging may help keep the brain healthy and reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

These measures include eating a healthy diet, staying socially active, avoiding tobacco and excessive alcohol consumption and exercising both the body and mind.

Symptoms of Alzheimer's

The most common early symptom of Alzheimer's is difficulty remembering newly learned information.

The human brain ages the same way the rest of our bodies change as we get older. Most of us eventually notice some slowed thinking and occasional problems with remembering certain things.

However, serious memory loss, confusion and other major changes in the way our minds work may be a sign that brain cells are failing.

Alzheimer's changes typically begin in the part of the brain that affects learning.

As Alzheimer's advances through the brain it leads to increasingly severe symptoms, including disorientation, and mood and behaviour changes.

Other symptoms include deepening confusion about events, time and places.

Some people experience unfounded suspicions about family, friends and professional caregivers.

Others may have difficulty speaking, swallowing and walking.

People with memory loss or other possible signs of Alzheimer's may find it hard to recognise they have a problem.

Signs of dementia may be more obvious to family members or friends.

Those who have Alzheimer's may repeat statements and questions over and over again.

They may forget conversations, appointments or events. Although everyone has occasional memory lapses, the memory loss associated with Alzheimer's disease persists and worsens, affecting their ability to function at work or at home.

They may also routinely misplace possessions, often putting them in illogical locations, become lost in familiar places or even eventually forget the names of family members and everyday objects.

They may have trouble finding the right words to identify objects, express thoughts or take part in conversations.

Earlier diagnosis and intervention methods are improving dramatically. Treatment options and sources of support can improve quality of life.

Prevention

There is no certain way to prevent Alzheimer's disease as there is no exact cause of the condition that is known yet. However, living a healthy lifestyle can help reduce your risk.

Reducing your risk of cardiovascular disease can also help. Cardiovascular disease has been linked with an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.

You may be able to reduce your risk of developing these conditions, together with other serious problems such as strokes and heart attacks, by taking steps to improve your cardiovascular health.

These include stopping smoking, keeping alcohol consumption to a minimum, eating a healthy balanced diet that includes at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day and exercising for at least 150 minutes every week by doing moderate intensity aerobic activity such as cycling or fast walking.

Make sure your blood pressure is checked and controlled through regular health tests. If you have diabetes, make sure you keep to the diet and take your medicine.

The latest research suggests that other factors are also important, although this does not mean these factors are directly responsible for causing dementia.

These include hearing loss, untreated depression, loneliness or social isolation and living a sedentary lifestyle.

Staying mentally and active helps.

This can be done by reading, learning foreign languages, playing musical instruments, taking part in group sports, trying new activities or hobbies and maintaining an active social life. socially

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