Aging is inevitable but Alzheimer's doesn't have to be

Still in your 30s? This is the best time to prepare

Manila Bulletin · 2 Oct 2024 · B-8

The Asia-pacific (APAC) region is on the cusp of a major demographic shift. By 2050, the number of elderly people— those aged 60 and above—is expected to nearly double to 1.2 billion. This group is commonly called the "Silver Tsunami" and will constitute about one-quarter of the entire regional population. The Philippines is also affected by this demographic shift, with recent trends showing the country's aging population is rising.



In parallel, recent projections also show that dementia cases are increasing in the Philippines, 85 percent of Filipinos suffering from dementia have Alzheimer's.

The data begets a key question— what can we do to minimie the risk of Alzheimer's?

Brain ageing and the Alzheimer's threat

As we age, the brain undergoes changes, and mental function evolves accordingly.

This can be categorized into three natural stages:

Normal ageing (characterized by mild, stable memory lapses)

Mild cognitive impairment (more noticeable cognitive challenges that do not hinder independence)

Dementia (significant cognitive decline that affects a person's ability to care for themselves)

Alzheimer's disease is often dubbed the "invisible disease" due to its quiet onset. The early symptoms of Alzheimer's—such as minor memory lapses or difficulty concentrating—are frequently dismissed as normal agerelated changes.

This misconception can be misleading. Alzheimer's can begin its course long before any symptoms emerge, sometimes up to 20 years prior. By the time signs of cognitive decline become apparent, significant brain damage has already occurred, making early detection and intervention critical.

A prevention roadmap with diet and supplements

According to Dr. Gary Small of the Herbalife Nutrition Advisory Board members, "one of the most promising avenues for Alzheimer's prevention lies in diet and nutrition. A growing body of research indicates that what we eat can have a profound impact on our brain health, both in the short and long term."

He continues, "In fact, the shared risk factors between heart disease and dementia indicate that adopting a holistic nutritional approach may serve as an effective preventive measure. By adjusting our diet to emphasize antioxidant and anti-inflammatory foods, and by embracing a more active lifestyle, we can manage abdominal obesity, high blood pressure, and other factors that impact brain health and overall well-being."

This means that diets rich in brain-boosting foods—such as those high in antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids, and other essential nutrients—can support cognitive function and potentially lower the risk of Alzheimer's.

In the Philippine context, traditional diets already offer a wealth of nutritional benefits. For example, many local diets emphasize fish, vegetables, and other foods that are naturally rich in omega-3s and antioxidants. Additionally, the inclusion of herbs like bacopa—a staple in Ayurvedic medicine known for its cognitive-enhancing properties—can further bolster brain health, memory, and attention spans. As an adaptogenic herb, bacopa can also boost the body's resilience to stress.

Supplements can also play an integral role in helping the body absorb and utilize these key vitamins and nutrients to optimize cognitive functions.

When considering supplements for brain health, consider caffeine, lutein, and curcumin. Caffeine can support key aspects of brain function, with recent studies suggesting that compounds in dark roast coffee may help protect against Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. Lutein, commonly known as the "eye vitamin," offers benefits for brain health. A recent study involving older adults showed that lutein and zeaxanthin supplements significantly improved complex attention and cognitive flexibility.

Lastly, curcumin, a compound found in turmeric and Indian curry, helps combat brain inflammation. Research from UCLA indicates that daily curcumin consumption enhances memory and mood in individuals with mild, age-related memory loss.

Taking a holistic approach to brain health

"Beyond nutrition, there are additional strategies we can embrace to maintain and enhance cognitive function as we age." says Dr. Small "Regular physical exercise is crucial as it increases blood flow to the brain, promotes neuron growth, and provides synaptic plasticity, all crucial for cognitive health. Activities like walking and resistance training also help mitigate risk factors like obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Cognitive engagement is equally important — mentally stimulating activities such as reading or learning new skills strengthen mental resilience and enhance cognitive reserves, reducing the risk of Alzheimer's. Lastly, mental health plays a significant role; managing stress, depression, and anxiety, while fostering emotional resilience and social connections, is essential for preserving cognitive function."

The Silver Tsunami is approaching, but the associated rise in Alzheimer's does not have to be. By adopting a proactive approach that includes early detection, a brain-healthy diet, regular physical and cognitive exercise, and strong mental health practices, we can plot a steady course to healthy ageing.

The early symptoms of Alzheimer's—such as minor memory lapses or difficulty concentrating — are frequently dismissed as normal age-related changes. This misconception can be misleading. Alzheimer's can begin its course long before any symptoms emerge, sometimes up to 20 years prior.