

AltHealth: Can Alzheimer's Disease Be Prevented?

I watched my father turn from a marathon runner and 11-time elected public official into a shrunken, lost soul, as transparent as wax. At the assisted living home where he finally landed, he believed he was in a hotel and getting ready to move on to the next destination. His vacant eyes, and the total lack of recognition in them, was disturbing. I could carry the gene for Alzheimer's disease myself, so this is a question that I keep close to heart: Has medical science made any advances at all in curing this relentless disease?

Alzheimer's disease is an irreversible, progressive brain disorder that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills. Eventually, one loses the ability to carry out the simplest tasks. Scientists are still playing a guessing game as to the cause, but a combination of genetics, lifestyle and environmental factors seem to influence when Alzheimer's disease begins and how it progresses. The markers can start long before the onset of the disease - if a person has problems remembering, learning, concentrating or making decisions, they may be more likely to develop Alzheimer's. Myriad other factors may influence the onset as well, including early head injuries.

The big question is: What can be done? The unfortunate answer is that once Alzheimer's sets in, there is almost nothing that can be done. Plaque from tau and beta-amyloid tissue has too far clogged the system; once a threshold has been reached, the brain begins to shrink. Aricept, the standard treatment, has almost no effect other than to sicken patients. My psychiatric consultant, Dr. B, tells me that another medication, Namenda, shows more promise and has fewer side effects, but insurance companies don't encourage its use because Aricept is a lot cheaper. My friend Dr. H tells me that from his experience, "The pills do nothing."

Does alternative health have any answers? Ginkgo biloba was once thought to slow the process, but most of the evidence was hearsay and research has shown that it is largely wishful thinking. Exercise and Omega-3 oil are thought to be helpful, but Dr. B has seen patients who swam every day and ate tons of fish, and "it didn't do a lick." You can find plenty of anecdotal evidence on blogs and theories abound, but the information is a swirling vortex of sometimes conflicting theories - drinking wine causes Alzheimer's, drinking wine prevents it; keeping the mind active slows the progress, crosswords are pointless; the list goes on, but science has yet to find any real answers. In the meantime, the rate of Alzheimer's in the general population rises every year. For those of us who are at risk, the prospect is frightening, however, I am a "the glass is half full" kind of person, so I focus on this: Maybe Alzheimer's, once it sets in, cannot be moved. But before that happens, the mind is a malleable thing. When one makes efforts to sharpen it, those efforts can make a difference.

While doing crosswords or Sudoku cannot delay the onset, learning a new language can. Researchers have discovered that people who speak two or more languages had a later onset of Alzheimer's. Frontotemporal dementia and vascular dementia were also delayed by an average of about 4.5 years compared to people who spoke only one language.

Keeping active and fit is another important preventative factor. It makes sense - invasive debris tends to be washed away by a fast-moving stream, while bacteria grows in a stagnant pond. And a healthy diet

certainly can't hurt, because a well-fueled body is far better able to repair damage and generate new cells. I noticed that when I began taking Calcium Hydroxyapatite after being diagnosed with osteoporosis, my short-term memory showed definite improvement. I may have been calcium deprived before that, so I can't say whether it would help anyone else, but I would advise anyone with any kind of nutritional deficiency to talk to their doctor about taking appropriate supplements.

Researchers are now examining how participating in arts activities may be linked to improving cognitive function and memory. Music is being studied as an aid in reducing behavioral symptoms, such as aggression, agitation and apathy, which can accompany dementia. Music participation seems to promote social interaction as well, improving self-esteem and well-being, which brings me to a very important point: Those suffering from depression are far more likely to develop Alzheimer's, and isolation breeds depression. Too many of our citizens become isolated as they age, and this is probably the worst thing for them to do. The statistics are unsettling. Social isolation alone can increase the risk of premature death by anywhere from 19% to 26%. It has been shown that people with a strong support community and positive relationships have better immune systems and recover faster, with fewer relapses. Keeping our connections to others may be one of the most valuable forms of health insurance we have.

So, the punchline? There isn't one. There is no answer, only a lot of questions. My recommendation is that if you are at any kind of risk for developing Alzheimer's, you should take the best care possible of yourself, learn new things and keep your friends close, but your enemies on the other side of the door. Who needs the stress? And participate in the arts and in life, don't just look on from the sidelines. Life begets life, staring down at a digital screen begets cervical spondylosis. You are here now - make it count.