

Health for the Whole Family

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EARLY DETECTION OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE CAN HELP SLOW ITS EFFECTS

Alzheimer's disease affects more than 5.3 million Americans, with a new case of Alzheimer's developing every 70 seconds. Characterized by the loss of mental ability in multiple areas such as memory, language, personality, and problem-solving skills, Alzheimer's is now the seventh leading cause of death in the United States.

The most common type of dementia, Alzheimer's disease destroys brain cells and results in memory loss and problems with thinking and behavior that interfere with daily life. Everyone experiences occasional memory loss and slowed thinking as they age, but severe memory loss, confusion, and major changes in the way our minds work are not a normal part of aging.

Age and family history are the most important risk factors for Alzheimer's, with women more likely to develop the condition than men. Although genetic factors may increase the risk of developing Alzheimer's, environmental and lifestyle factors also play a role. Maintaining a healthy body weight, getting regular exercise, and keeping blood pressure and cholesterol levels in the normal range may reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's.

Additionally, researchers have found that those who have more years of formal education, stay physically active, and engage in mentally challenging activities late into life have a lower risk of developing Alzheimer's.

The osteopathic physician members of Iowa Osteopathic Medical Association also warns their patients about the increased risk of developing Alzheimer's earlier due to heavy drinking and smoking. Recent research shows that heavy drinking, defined as more than two drinks a day, was found to lead to an almost five year earlier onset of Alzheimer's, and for those who smoked more than 20 cigarettes a day, Alzheimer's developed two years sooner. Even second hand smoke can affect the development of Alzheimer's".

Although scientists have not yet found a cure for Alzheimer's, early detection and treatment may delay progression of the disease. According to the Alzheimer's Association, there are 10 warning signs of Alzheimer's. If you notice any of these signs in yourself or a loved one, see your physician immediately.

1. Memory changes that disrupt daily life
2. Challenges in planning or solving problems
3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks
4. Confusion with time or place
5. Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
6. New problems with words in speaking or writing
7. Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
8. Decreased or poor judgment
9. Withdrawal from work or social activities
10. Changes in mood and personality

Many people let these common symptoms of Alzheimer's slide until it becomes too late. The fact is Alzheimer's progresses slowly and affords only a window of opportunity to intervene and have an impact on the rate of progression.

Tests for Alzheimer's can include blood tests for thyroid function, infections, and vitamin B deficiencies; imaging tests to show areas of the brain that might be shrinking due to Alzheimer's; and neuropsychological tests to examine specific brain functions that are becoming impaired.

In the early stages of Alzheimer's, an individual may be able to function on her own with the help of memory aids. These individuals may also benefit from medications to help delay progression of the disease. Advanced cases of Alzheimer's may require a caregiver or full-time aide to provide assistance to the individual in the home or a nursing facility.

The most important thing to keep in mind regarding Alzheimer's is that the sooner it is diagnosed, the more effective treatment will be. Pay attention to any and all behavior that is out of the ordinary and see a doctor immediately if you suspect something is wrong.

Preventive medicine is just one aspect of care osteopathic physicians (D.O.s) provide. D.O.s are fully-licensed to prescribe medicine and practice in all specialty areas including surgery. D.O.s are trained to consider the health of the whole person and use their hands to help diagnose and treat their patients.

To learn more about the 10 warning signs of Alzheimer's, please contact the Alzheimer's Association at www.alz.org/10signs or 877-IS IT ALZ (877.474.8259).

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