

A healthy lifestyle protects from Alzheimer's

Written by Larry Lucas, NNPA Columnist
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My wife has dozens of magazines largely devoted to the myriad ways in which you can dress, style your hair and put on make-up to look younger than your years. But the real secret to growing old gracefully is taking care of both your mind and body so you can stay healthy and active longer. When it comes to Alzheimer's disease, living a healthy lifestyle is one of the most important things you can do to help protect yourself from developing it.

Every 70 seconds, someone develops Alzheimer's disease, a progressive, fatal brain disease, according to the Alzheimer's Association. Alzheimer's disease and dementia are not the same thing. Dementia is not a specific disease, but rather a generalized term to describe a group of symptoms that usually includes memory loss and Alzheimer's is the most common form.

Also, occasional forgetfulness does not necessarily mean you have Alzheimer's—we all misplace our car keys from time to time! It's important to recognize when symptoms like memory loss and confusion become serious and major interferences in your daily life. Early diagnosis of the disease is important for treatment and planning.

Many people think genetics play the biggest role in determining who develops Alzheimer's and while science has found a genetic link to Alzheimer's disease, true familial Alzheimer's accounts for less than 5 percent of cases. In fact, new research has shown that people with other types of health problems, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, are more likely to develop Alzheimer's later in life. A recent Kaiser Permanente study found even having slightly high cholesterol levels in your early 40s puts you at significantly – 66 percent – greater risk for developing Alzheimer's decades later.

Because African Americans have high incidences of diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, we are particularly at risk for developing Alzheimer's. According to the Alzheimer's Association, the number of African Americans entering the at-risk age group is estimated to double to 6.9 million by 2030. Making lifestyle changes and taking the appropriate prescriptions for chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol could reduce your risk of developing Alzheimer's.

Preventing or slowing the progression of Alzheimer's isn't just about taking care of your body; it's also about taking care of your mind. Remaining mentally and socially active have been found to reduce the chances of developing the disease. Just like your body, your mind can get weak if it doesn't get regular exercise. Simple activities like reading and doing crossword puzzles, as well as traveling and volunteering, can help your mind stay young and healthy.

While there is no cure or no single diagnostic test for Alzheimer's, there are now more treatments than ever to enhance patients' quality of life. And, there are 91 new medicines currently in development for the disease, including one that aims to prevent or reverse progression of the disease, according to a report from the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America.

However, these medicines are useless if patients cannot access them. That's why America's pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies sponsor the Partnership for Prescription Assistance (PPA). Since its launch in April 2005, PPA has helped connect more than 5.8 million

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patients in need to programs that provide either free or nearly free medicines. For more information, patients can call 1-888-4PPA-NOW or visit www.pparx.org .

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