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October 30, 2006

Learn About Alzheimer's Disease this Month

A retail catalog offers a tee shirt that reads "I know I came into this room for something . . ." Many of us can sympathize with the sentiment – we often joke about growing older and losing our short-term memory. But for those with true dementia, memory loss is no laughing matter.

The most common form of dementia (a group of conditions in which brain cells are gradually destroyed) is Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's may strike people as young as their thirties or forties, but the majority of its victims are over age 65. It damages brain cells that are responsible for memory, judgment, and speech first, but also results in personality and behavioral changes, such as anxiety, suspiciousness, agitation, delusions, and hallucinations. Over time, a person also will lose the ability to perform daily living activities like dressing, eating, and bathing. As the disease progresses and more brain cells are lost, other essential functions in the body fail, resulting in the need for constant care and supervision. Ultimately, Alzheimer's is a fatal disease.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, the number of Americans suffering from this disease has more than doubled since 1980; the estimated number of people with Alzheimer's in this country is approximately 4.5 million. As our population ages, that number is expected to increase to as many as 11.3 to 16 million by 2050. Most people live from 8 to 20 years after receiving a diagnosis of Alzheimer's.

Alzheimer's disease is costly. The National Institute on Aging estimates that the national cost of both direct and indirect care for people with this condition is at least \$100 billion, with individual cost of care averaging \$174,000. The Alzheimer's Association reports that 70% of sufferers are cared for by family and friends at home, and 30% receive paid care at an out-of-pocket cost of \$19,000 per year. In 2005, Medicare paid \$91 billion and Medicaid paid \$21 billion for Alzheimer's care. Both are expected to pay substantially more by 2010.

Although the cause of Alzheimer's is unknown, research suggests there may be multiple factors involved, including both genetic and nongenic causes. However, certain risk factors have been identified. They include

Age: The majority of cases of Alzheimer's occur in people over 65. While only about 5-10% of people over age 65 have been diagnosed, the percentage increases to 50% at age 85. (Alzheimer's Association)

Family History: When a parent or sibling has Alzheimer's disease, the child has an increased risk.

Genetics: Two categories of genes have been identified that increase the likelihood that the disease will develop, but their existence does not guarantee it will occur.

Head Injury: There is a strong link between a serious head injury and the development of the disease later in life.

Heart Health: Research has shown a strong relationship between heart health and brain health. Since the brain uses about 20% of the food and oxygen carried by the blood and is rich in blood vessels, conditions that damage the heart and blood vessels can reduce the amount of nutrients sent to the brain.

Although there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, recent studies have shown that people are less likely to develop any form of dementia, including Alzheimer's, if they exercise, stay connected socially, and keep mentally fit and active. Physical exercise improves blood flow to the brain and seems to encourage the formation of new brain cells. Mentally stimulating activities strengthen the connections between brain cells, and may even create new nerve cells. Social activity can reduce stress levels and can also be stimulating; this helps to maintain and strengthen brain cells as well.

Additional steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's include eating healthy and protecting the head from injury. Low fat, low cholesterol diets help to prevent stroke and heart disease, thereby maintaining an ample supply of nutrients and oxygen to the brain, and a diet rich in dark colored fruits and vegetables contains antioxidants, which protect the brain cells. To avoid head injury, protective headgear should be worn when engaging in activities like bicycling, horseback riding, and skating, seat belts always should be worn when driving or riding in a motor vehicle, and the installation of proper lighting, handrails in showers and in stairways, and the removal of trip hazards can prevent falls.

November is Alzheimer's disease month, and considerable information is available about Alzheimer's disease to help both its victims and their care-givers. One good source is the Alzheimer's Association, which can be reached at 1-800-272-3900 (www.alz.org). For further information about this or other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org)