

I've Misplaced My Keys Again— Do I Have Alzheimer's?

*By Ellen D. Hosafros, Director of Corporate Communications, Corporate Synergies
October 2018*

For people of an advanced age, Alzheimer's disease is often on their mind. Last year my husband and I moved to a retirement community where the residents range in age from the mid-50s to 100+. I've noticed a pattern among our new friends. When someone can't think of a word, misplaces their car keys, or forgets the reason for walking into a room, the typical refrain is a nervous, "Yikes, do I have Alzheimer's?"

Alzheimer's is indeed yikes-worthy. It's a progressive disease that destroys memory and other mental functions. While treatment can help ease symptoms, the condition is incurable and always gets worse. Alzheimer's interferes with daily tasks, erases short-term memory and results in the inability to take care of oneself.

People are living longer, healthier lives, yet as the years stack up, Alzheimer's disease becomes a real threat. One in 10 Americans over age 65 (5.5 million) and about 200,000 people under 65 have Alzheimer's; two-thirds of victims are women.

We senior citizens look and act very differently than past generations. With today's emphasis on exercise and nutrition (not to mention the creative use of hair dye and surgical nips and tucks), we're blowing raspberries at the aging process.

We're not standing still and waiting for Alzheimer's to rob our minds.

Just about everyone I know is actively staving off the impacts of aging on the body and brain. In my community if you step off the curb without looking both ways you might get mowed over by someone who's running (not walking) their dog. One of my neighbors is 80 and plays tennis several times a week. His wife (same age) power walks a couple of miles in 90-degree heat. They both look and behave years younger, which is true of many people I've met here.

Yet, while most of the older people I know are physically active, they fret about Alzheimer's because it seems so darned inevitable.

Or is it?

Researchers now know that Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia can result from many factors, including genetics and lifestyle. The Alzheimer's Association recently reported on the results of promising research that involved a large, randomized clinical trial involving 9,361 older adults with high blood pressure. The participants had an increased cardiovascular risk, but hadn't been diagnosed with diabetes, dementia or a prior stroke.

The trial demonstrated 19% reduction in the risk for developing cognitive decline and dementia for participants who received aggressive treatment of high blood pressure. Normal blood pressure is 120/80, right? If participants maintained systolic blood pressure (the first number of a blood pressure reading) of 120 or less, this resulted in fewer new cases of mild cognitive impairment and dementia.

Take that, Alzheimer's!

A representative from the Alzheimer's Association said the research findings demonstrate that there are ways to reduce the risk of mild cognitive impairment and full-blown dementia. "While more research is needed on all causes of dementia, the new data is an exciting first in our understanding of how aggressively treating systolic blood pressure (especially for those older than the age of 50) can be part of a solution," writes Maria C. Carrillo, Ph.D.

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE OR SENIOR MOMENT?	
Poor judgment and decision-making	Making a bad decision now and then
Inability to manage a budget	Missing a monthly payment
Losing track of the date or season	Forgetting which day it is but remembering later
Difficulty having a conversation	Sometimes forgetting which word to use
Misplacing things and being unable to find them	Losing things from time to time

Research is still evolving, but evidence is strong that people can reduce the risk of cognitive decline by making key lifestyle changes now. (Millennials and Gen Xer's, are you listening?)

The Alzheimer's Association recommends 10 ways to support brain health:

1. **Get regular physical exercise.** Studies have found an association between regular cardiovascular exercise that elevates the heart rate and increases blood flow to the brain and body and reduced risk of cognitive decline.
2. **Keep learning.** Obtaining formal education at any age can reduce the risk of losing cognitive skills. Take a class at a local college, community center or online.
3. **Don't smoke, or quit.** Smoking constricts blood flow, so it makes sense that it increases the risk of mental decline. People who stop smoking can reduce the risk to levels that are similar to those who haven't smoked.
4. **Maintain heart health.** Obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes have a negative impact on cognitive health.
5. **Eat a healthy diet.** While more research is needed, it is thought that a low-fat diet that includes veggies and fruit can provide protection.
6. **Avoid brain injury.** Wear a seat belt, use a helmet when riding a bike or playing contact sports, and prevent fall down.
7. **Get adequate ZZZZs.** Insomnia and sleep apnea may result in memory and thinking issues.

8. **Protect mental health.** Some studies link depression and high stress with an increased risk of cognitive decline.
9. **Try something new.** Engage in challenging activities that stretch your capabilities. Build a piece of furniture, restore a car, or join a political campaign.
10. **Get social.** Make friends to avoid isolation. Sing, sculpt, paint, play cards, golf—do whatever is fun for you and involves other people.

Even though I'm past retirement age I still am employed, and I make sure to squeeze in frequent 3.7 mile-per-hour walks on a treadmill. I participate in water aerobics, which is reminiscent of Army boot camp calisthenics—aggressive, unrelenting, fast, and definitely not for wimps. (I learned that it's possible to sweat in water). My husband plays three rounds of golf a week and proudly shows off his high daily steps on his Fitbit. We go for frequent walks around the neighborhood while watching out for senior citizen dog-runners.

Despite having a full-time job that I love, I decided that my brain needed more challenge, so I enrolled in a clay sculpting class at a local arts museum. (Think Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore in the movie "Ghost.") My wheel-thrown pots are tragic, but with practice I hope to get the hang of it. I'm making new friends in the class, and I can't walk into the clay studio without whistling "Unchained Melody."

Do I still worry about Alzheimer's? Sure, but I'm not going to let my brain get tied up in a knot. If I may offer one piece of advice it's this: don't wait until you're my age to get engaged in those 10 recommendations for brain health. Living an active, joyful life is good for the brain, body and soul.

More resources:

[Alzheimer's Disease by the Numbers Infographic](#)
[WebMD](#), "Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease Overview"
[Alz.org](#), "Alzheimer's and Dementia Medical Testing"
[NIH.gov](#), "Alzheimer's Caregiving"

¹[Alz.org](#), "2018 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures"

²[Alz.org](#), "Sprint for Discovery: New Dementia and Cardiovascular Findings"

Visit [HealthDiscovery.org](#) for related topics.