Understanding Alzheimer’s Disease: It’s More Than Forgetfulness

What is Alzheimer’s Disease?

Many people get concerned about their memory as they age and ask if there is anything that can be done to prevent memory loss. Alzheimer’s disease is an irreversible and progressive brain disorder that causes a slow decline in memory, thinking and reasoning skills, and difficulty completing familiar tasks.

Alzheimer’s is typically a disease of the elderly. However, nearly 200,000 Americans under age 65 have early onset disease that strikes in their 30s, 40s, or 50s, according to the Alzheimer’s Association.

“Alzheimer’s is a disease, not a part of normal aging,” says Alison Goate, DPhil, Willard T.C. Johnson Research Professor of Neurogenetics, and Director of the Ronald M. Loeb Center for Alzheimer’s Disease at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

People with Alzheimer’s will often have vivid memories of an event that happened many years ago, but will have trouble retaining new information and a conversation that occurred five minutes earlier. There can also be significant confusion, such as getting lost while walking or driving in a familiar area, or taking longer to complete a familiar task, such as following a recipe.

The symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease worsen over time, however the rate at which the disease progresses varies for each person. The average life expectancy is four to eight years after diagnosis. In some cases, however, it can be as long as 20 years, depending on other factors. In the early stages, memory impairment is mild and does not affect longevity. But as the disease gets worse, many people lose the ability to have a conversation, ask the same questions repeatedly, and forget common words when speaking.

Scientists have made tremendous strides in understanding the biology of this puzzling disease. Fifteen years ago, Alzheimer’s disease could only be diagnosed with an autopsy. Today, physicians know that certain proteins found in spinal fluid and markers on brain scan images are clues that Alzheimer’s is present.

Currently, there is no cure for Alzheimer’s, but drug and non-drug treatments may help with both cognitive and behavioral symptoms. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved medications that may slow down dementia symptoms if started in the early stages. Talk to your doctor about what treatment is right for you.

Alzheimer’s is a disease, not a part of normal aging
—Alison Goate, DPhil, Director of the Ronald M. Loeb Center for Alzheimer’s Disease at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

What Happens in the Brain

A healthy human brain contains tens of billions of nerve cells called neurons that are connected together. These nerve cells send messages to different parts of the brain and to the muscles and organs of the body. Alzheimer’s disrupts this communication among nerve cells, causing loss of function and eventually cell death.

Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center (ADRC) at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

Mount Sinai’s Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center (ADRC) is a comprehensive research facility and clinical program dedicated to the study and treatment of normal aging and Alzheimer’s disease. With research into the causes of dementia, diagnostic services, and caregiver programs, the ADRC seeks to improve diagnosis, delay disease progression, and enhance the well-being of those affected by Alzheimer’s disease.

To learn more about the research and clinical trials offered at Mount Sinai, visit: http://icahn.mssm.edu/research/adrc.