



GETTING FORGETFUL? HOW TO AVOID ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Forgot where you put your glasses? That's alright, as long as you haven't forgotten that you use glasses. We expect to live longer but as well as those extra years we want good quality. The World Health Organisation says that the average disability time before death is eight years – some of this is due to Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's disease is the commonest form of dementia, which causes problems with memory and thinking abilities, as well as personality changes. An estimated 38,000 New Zealanders have dementia. Over 65 years of age, the likelihood of suffering this condition doubles every five years with the percentage being around 40% of people at the age of 80. 22% of people over the age of 70 have mild cognitive impairment (reduced ability to think properly).

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive degenerative brain disease, and is one of the age-related inflammatory diseases like diabetes, hypertension, heart attack and stroke. It often is associated with some of these inflammatory diseases too.

It may start with slight memory loss and confusion but it eventually leads to irreversible mental impairment that destroys a person's ability to remember, reason, learn and imagine. Most of us have met someone with Alzheimer's disease.

Apart from the increasing persistent forgetfulness of recent events, the other symptoms can start slowly. They can include difficulties with abstract thinking, difficulty finding the right word, and disorientation. You forget what day it is, where you are and who you are with.

Loss of judgement starts to occur. For example, being able to solve an everyday problem like what to do if the food starts to burn. Difficulty performing familiar tasks like making a cup of tea.

Personality changes can happen like anxiety, aggressiveness, imagining people are stealing your things, and inappropriate behaviour. Some people wander off and get lost.

We are not sure what causes Alzheimer's disease but we do know that inflammation is the underlying process. Studies have shown that older people taking non steroidal anti inflammatory drugs for arthritis have reduced Alzheimer's disease. This, and finding it associated with diabetes, heart problems, depression, etc., suggests an inflammatory cause.

The diagnosis is usually from the doctor getting a history from the patient or their relatives and examining them, as well as a few blood tests. Sometimes a head scan can show reduced brain mass. A thorough neuropsychological assessment is a detailed analysis of the person's ability to think and perform in many different ways.

There is no proven treatment of Alzheimer's disease, however, it is important, particularly in older people, to rule out conditions that could be masquerading as Alzheimer's disease. These include underactive thyroid, depression, vitamin B12 deficiency, or any other medical condition.

Helping patients with Alzheimers Disease with any depression or anxiety can improve the condition by 30%. There are some special drugs that can delay Alzheimer's disease onset for a period of time.

Practical things that you can do to prevent memory problems, cognitive decline, Alzheimer's disease and dementia as you get older include the following:

- Don't smoke.
- Be in bed and asleep before 10:30pm so that you can make your own natural melatonin which is a restorative and anti inflammatory substance.
- Undertake regular physical exercise.
- Avoid stress.
- If you already have diabetes, high cholesterol, hypertension, or any other inflammatory health condition, you must control it as well as possible.
- Do lots of mental exercise like crosswords and use your brain as much as possible because this causes an increase of a chemical called nerve growth factor, and this causes new nerve connections in your brain.
- If you are on non steroidal anti inflammatories this will help you. It is possible that fish oil, ginkgo biloba, vitamin C and vitamin E can help you.
- If you are taking statin medicines for cholesterol, this will have an effect of reducing inflammation and so be helpful.
- Dietary interventions include lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, include blueberries and avoid high animal fats.
- Taking a good multivitamin may be useful.

Future research that shows promise has focused on drugs, but there has also been research on natural substances including Resveratrol (found in red wine, especially pinot noir), Curcumin (this is in turmeric), Melatonin, Co-enzyme Q10 and α Alpha lipoic acid. The last two can be bought from the health or chemist shop.