



ALZHEIMER'S AWARENESS MONTH

Learn from expert researchers about the debilitating disease and its future, tips for prevention, and more

It can start out as innocuous forgetfulness that we simply write off as a result of stress or being sleep-deprived. Unpredictable mood changes may be disregarded; *they were probably just having a bad week*. Then, eventually, a loved one's behavior is seemingly unrecognizable.

Living with a family member with Alzheimer's, it doesn't necessarily hit like a ton of bricks; in fact, the disease is marked by a progressive decline in brain functions. It can be gradual, with symptoms that aren't immediately acknowledged if we indiscriminately write them off.

On Alzheimer's and Brain Awareness Month, we sought out experts to help recognize the symptoms of the disease and to ultimately help families plan for the future.

"Early stages of Alzheimer's Disease (AD) should be distinguished from the normal slowing in memory associated with aging," said Dr. Alberto Serrano-Pozo, Instructor in Neurology at Massachusetts General Hospital and researcher at Massachusetts Alzheimer's Disease Research Center.

Learning the early signs and symptoms of Alzheimer's is crucial for family members and health care professionals alike. From there, primary care physicians and specialists can provide a diagnosis and develop a plan for the family to provide a greater degree of support.

"Primary care physicians can do screening memory tests and refer patients with abnormal scores to the general or behavioral neurologist for an accurate early diagnosis," Dr. Serrano-Pozo explained. "There is no cure for AD and no new drugs for its symptoms since 2003, but early diagnosis can help patients and families to better plan for what lies ahead and give them the chance to enroll in ongoing clinical trials, which aim at stopping AD at its earliest stages."

The future of Alzheimer's disease

From the family member's perspective, a diagnosis is daunting, altering life plans in an instant. Understanding this perspective is crucial to delivering proper care and support.

"Alzheimer's Disease is a devastating, progressive, irreversible condition that robs patients and their loved ones of their humanity and dignity," said Dr. Gad A. Marshall, Associate Medical Director of Clinical Trials Center for Alzheimer Research & Treatment at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

It is crucial, then, that resources are allocated to research to improve the treatment and prevention of the disease.

"Alzheimer's disease has reached epidemic proportions and the currently available treatments only modestly help with symptoms but do not alter the course of the disease," Dr. Marshall said. "It is therefore imperative to advance research focused on improving early diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of Alzheimer's disease. Patients, caregivers, healthcare providers, and researchers all need to work together to achieve this goal."

Inspired by ongoing research, and motivated to play an active role in prevention of the disease, general lifestyle tips can be relayed by health care professionals to patients and their families.

"A healthy lifestyle (exercise, Mediterranean diet, social and intellectual activities) can help prevent or delay AD in people at risk," Dr. Serrano-Pozo advised.