



Making *Life Easier*™

Alzheimer's and the Aging Brain

As part of the natural aging process, many people will encounter minor cognitive challenges or so called "senior moments." While it can be frustrating trying to remember someone's name or locate the car keys, occasional forgetfulness and "tip of the tongue" experiences are not an indication that someone has Alzheimer's or another form of dementia.

The human brain is an extremely complex organ that tells us when we are cold, hungry, tired or in pain. It enables us to drive a car, prepare a meal, balance the checkbook, read a book and laugh at a joke. Our brain is the human body's command center.

"This November, we recognize National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month by sharing tips on caring for loved ones with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, including how to cope and manage daily living activities," said Mary Doepke, RN, Owner of Home Helpers of Hinsdale.

Dementia refers to various disorders that affect the functioning of one's brain, and is characterized by mental decline and impairment. The three chronic health conditions associated with dementia are Alzheimer's (cognitive decline), Parkinson's – (neurologic disorder that affects the central nervous system), and Multi-Infarct Dementia (vascular disease).

Alzheimer's Disease is a progressive and fatal brain disease that destroys brain cells, causing memory loss and problems with thinking and behavior. It is the most common form of dementia, affecting 5.3 million Americans, and currently, there is no known cure.

While genetics and lifestyle choices may affect one's susceptibility to developing Alzheimer's or another form of dementia, age is the biggest risk factor. According to the Alzheimer's Association, one's risk doubles about every five years after age 65, reaching nearly 50% after age 85.

While aging is inevitable, there are risk factors that can be controlled:

- **Head Injury:** Protect your head by wearing a seat belt/helmet and "fall-proofing" your home.
- **Heart/Head Connection:** Monitor conditions that damage heart or blood vessels, including high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, diabetes & high cholesterol.
- **General Healthy Aging:** Maintain a healthy weight, avoid tobacco & excess alcohol, remain socially engaged, and exercise both your body and mind.

Though prevention is ideal, it is not certain, making it all the more important to know the 10 warning signs of Alzheimer's:

- 1) Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- 2) Challenges in planning or solving problems
- 3) Difficulty completing familiar tasks
- 4) Confusion with time or place

- 5) Trouble understanding visual images & spatial relationships
- 6) New problems with words in speaking & writing
- 7) Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- 8) Decreased or poor judgment
- 9) Withdrawal from work or social activities
- 10) Changes in mood and personality

If your loved one is exhibiting any of the signs above, it's important to consult a health care professional. Due to HIPPA regulations your loved one's doctor may not be able to speak to you without a signed release. Early detection has many benefits, including giving you and your loved ones more time to plan for the future and make decisions to maximize quality of life. It also increases the chances of benefitting from treatment and lessens anxiety about unknown problems. Dealing with Alzheimer's can be emotionally challenging, but the more familiar you are with the signs and symptoms of the disease the better you will be able to cope with the disease and relieve stress.

It's also important to remember that no two people experience Alzheimer's the same way – a caregiver's responsibilities can range from making financial decisions, managing changes in behavior, to helping a loved one get dressed in the morning. The following are basic caregiving tips:

- **Establish a routine** that focuses on the person's abilities and enjoyment of activities.
- **Keep things simple** by limiting distractions, asking one question at a time and serving only one or two foods at a time, preferably finger foods.
- **Use a "watch me" technique** for eating, brushing teeth and dressing.
- **Be patient and focus on the positive.** The affects of the disease can be frustrating and emotionally upsetting to both the caregiver and the person with Alzheimer's, but enjoy the happy moments.
- **As a caregiver, take care of yourself.** Caring for one with Alzheimer's can be extremely draining – emotionally, physically and mentally. Allow yourself a break by asking family and friends to help, or consider hiring a professional caregiver, such as Home Helpers, to provide respite care. Pride yourself on doing the best you can do.
- **Utilize available resources:**
 - Home Helpers, www.HomeHelpers.CC, 800-216-4196
 - Alzheimer's Association, www.alz.org, 800-272-3900 (24-hour helpline)
 - National Institute on Aging – Alzheimer's Disease fact sheet – www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/Publications/adfact.htm
 - National Mental Health Association, www.nmha.org, 800-969-6642

HOME HELPERS – *Making Life Easier* Home Helpers offers quality non-medical and personal care* and companionship services similar to the care and support often provided by family members. Our flexible care plans are tailored to fit our clients' specific needs and budgets. Compassionate Care is a bi-monthly newsletter produced by Home Helpers. We hope you found this edition to be informative and helpful.

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