COMMUNITY MATTERS
Finding Answers for Alzheimer’s
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It's a common source of light-hearted humor, the so-called "senior moment" when a well-known name stays on the tip of the tongue, car keys hide in plain sight or the key ingredient of a traditional holiday dessert gets left unused on the kitchen countertop. But when these moments start to happen too frequently, it inevitably leads to the dreaded question: "Could it be Alzheimer's?"

Now estimated to affect 5.4 million Americans, Alzheimer’s is an irreversible, progressive brain disease that causes memory loss in its earliest stages. People with this degenerative condition eventually lose the ability to carry out the simple tasks of everyday living. While progress is being made to identify the causes of Alzheimer’s and develop drugs and treatments, the disease remains a much-feared disease that has no cure.

Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia, a term used for a group of brain diseases that cause the loss of intellectual and social skills that interfere with everyday life and self care. While the cause of Alzheimer’s is currently unknown, we believe it may involve a combination of genetic, environmental and lifestyle factors. Current medications and treatment approaches can improve symptoms for a time and help patients preserve their independence.

The clinical diagnosis of Alzheimer’s can be difficult as there are several different conditions including: frontotemporal, Lewy bodies, mixed and vascular dementia. While the symptoms of these neurodegenerative processes vary, they present similar challenges for the people affected and those who care for them. If you’re concerned that you or a loved one may be developing Alzheimer’s, watch for these 10 early signs and symptoms as identified by the Alzheimer’s Association, and check with your doctor if they persist:

- Progressive memory loss that disrupts daily life such as forgetting names of loved ones and getting lost in familiar places.
- Challenges in planning or solving problems
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
- New problems with words in speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood and personality

Keep in mind that these symptoms can be caused by other disease conditions or life influences that can get better with medical interventions. It’s also important to rule out depression as a cause for behavioral changes. Getting an expert medical assessment can assure that your "senior moments" aren’t signaling a more serious condition. If you are a caregiver, it’s important to seek out testing from a primary care provider and increase home monitoring.

If you are concerned about a loved one, open and honest communication with him or her is the best approach. However, if this conversation is difficult, it’s OK to make a separate appointment with the primary care provider to address the family’s concerns. A test can be done at the elder’s next appointment.

Alzheimer’s was named for the German physician who first described it in 1906, Dr. Alois Alzheimer. During the autopsy of brain tissue of a 51-year-old female patient who suffered memory loss, language problems and unpredictable behavior, he found abnormal clumps and tangles of fibers. These abnormal structures have been identified as protein fragments and twisted fibers that are called beta-amyloid and tau. These abnormalities that build up in between brain nerve cells have been theorized to cause cell damage and death, which ultimately disrupts communication among the brain’s nerve cells.

Alzheimer’s is the sixth leading cause of death in America. The disease is not a normal part of aging, but it occurs more frequently in older people. Alzheimer’s is diagnosed in people over 60 years old 90% of the time. However, there are cases when the disease is diagnosed at a young age, sometimes as early as 30 years old, which is referred to as early-onset Alzheimer’s.

The bulging baby-boomer generation is causing alarm as the number of people 65 and older is expected to grow from 40 million to 72.1 million by 2030. And people are living longer due to medical advances and personal fitness. Significant growth also is expected in the next two decades in the population 85 and older, from 5.5 million to 8.7 million.

To learn more, visit the Alzheimer’s Association website www.alz.org or www.alzheimers.gov.

Cameron Gardner, MD, is a board-certified family physician. He came to North Valley Professional Center from Libby, MT where he excelled for six years at his family practice. He graduated from the University of Rochester School of Medicine where he received his medical degree with a distinction in research on geriatric depression. He later moved to Billings where he completed his family medicine training while earning a resident teaching award.