

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE AND OTHER DEMENTIAS

EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK
BY STEPHEN MUSEHL

I have had the pleasure to work with individuals with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, and their care partners, for more than a decade. In this time, I have seen an incredible growth in the overall knowledge of our community regarding this disease. With Grey, Bruce, Huron and Perth counties all having more adults over age 65 than the provincial and national averages (Grey/Bruce is almost 50 per cent higher), I thought it important to share information I am asked about almost daily. The more knowledge we have, the better we can help our family, friends and neighbours, and we can also fight the stigmas that still exist today.

What is Alzheimer's disease and how is it different from dementia?

While many people think of Alzheimer's disease as a fairly recent diagnostic discovery, it was actually first discovered by Dr. Alois Alzheimer in 1906. While it was discovered more than 100 years ago, we still have a great deal to learn. What we do know is that dementia is a general term used to describe a group of symptoms such as memory loss, change of cognitive functioning, behavioural changes and social abilities.

Dementia is not a specific disease itself. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, and is characterized by two hallmarks — plaques and tangles. Plaques are microscopic and dense clusters of a protein called beta amyloid (A-beta), and are scattered throughout the brain. These clusters prevent signals from being transferred between nerve cells in the brain, and ultimately cause nerve cells to die. Tangles are fibrous clumps inside nerve cells, eventually "choking" the living cells. When these cells degenerate and die, the brain shrinks in some areas. Some of the other more common forms of dementia include vascular dementia, mixed dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies, and frontotemporal dementia

Is dementia a normal part of aging?

No! While 40 per cent of people aged 65 and older will experience memory loss, this is known as 'age-associated memory impairment,' which is a part of the normal aging process. Alzheimer's disease and other dementias are not a normal part of aging.

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Some differences could include not being able to recall the name of an acquaintance vs not being able to remember the names of family members. Another difference could be that with normal aging, you are worried about your memory and your relatives are not, while with dementia, your relatives are worried about your memory, but you are not. If you or your family are worried, you should talk to your family doctor or contact the Alzheimer Society.

How common is dementia?

- 564,000 Canadians and nearly 50 million people around the world live with dementia.
- Grey/Bruce, Huron and Perth Alzheimer societies help more than 3,000 families a year.
- 65 per cent diagnosed over age 65 are women.

Getting a diagnosis

Many people delay or don't bother to get a diagnosis, but there are many reasons to take this important step. Often, symptoms indicate a reversible dementia and not Alzheimer's disease. While there is no single test to determine Alzheimer's disease, the diagnostic process uses medical history, a physical exam, lab tests and cognitive tests. The caregiver can be instrumental in helping with a proper diagnostic as well, and whenever possible, we encourage the support of a loved one to attend with the person looking for a diagnosis. In Grey, Bruce, Huron and Perth, we are very lucky to have several specialized memory clinics that have amazing inter-professional teams to help diagnose and monitor the disease progression.

If somebody is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or another non-reversible dementia, there is much that can be done to help.

What can be done to help after diagnosis?

While there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, there are still many important reasons not to avoid a diagnosis, and to find resources to help you.

First and foremost, being able to understand the disease early is important, so that you can participate in your health care and personal decisions, as well as future plans. There are several medications approved for treating Alzheimer's disease that improve quality of life for some. And while medications don't work for everyone, treatment is usually most effective when started early.

For many, the disease will require assistance in many daily activities. Research has shown that connecting to your local Alzheimer Society and participating in a Memory Clinic will enable you to stay in your home and your community for much longer than people who do not. Thousands of people across Grey, Bruce, Huron and Perth have found ways to live well with dementia.

If I can't cure dementia, can I prevent it?

Maybe. There are no guarantees, but several promising studies have shown that a healthy lifestyle can help reduce your risk. While some people living extremely healthy lifestyles can still get Alzheimer's disease, the following have shown to affect risk:

- High cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity — all major risk factors in cardiovascular disease — are also major risks in Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.
- Studies have shown that smokers are at a 45 per cent higher risk of developing Alzheimer's than non-smokers. The increased risk can be reversed by quitting smoking.
- Being physically active, drinking alcohol moderately or not at all, being socially active and eating a healthy diet have been shown time and again to reduce the risk of Alzheimer's and other dementias.

For more information on preventative measures, please reach out to your local Alzheimer Society.

I need help!

Throughout the journeys of individuals with dementia and their care partners, help will be needed. Nobody can, or should, fight this disease alone. There are many supports available to help in your local community, and I will list just a few:

- Connect with your local Alzheimer Society. They have dementia-specific programs and resources. A 'First Link Navigator' will help you navigate our complex health care system and services where and when you need them. All local societies have exercise and recreation programs, support groups, counselling, education and more.
- Home and Community Care. While our health care system is evolving, personal care in the home is currently provided by Home and Community Care. While some resources are scarce, this is an important place to start.

- Community support services. There are so many great community support services in our four counties. This includes day-away programs, volunteer and accessible transportation, Meals on Wheels, frozen meals, friendly visiting programs, housekeeping, caregiver supports and overnight respite. Your Alzheimer Society contact will know how to connect you to these services.
- Regular memory clinic or primary care check-ups. Staying connected to your primary care physician and/or memory clinic team is essential for monitoring and adjusting.

be done to support you and your family. Many people are willing to help, but they just don't know how. Sharing your diagnosis may be extremely difficult (and the Alzheimer Society can help you through this process), but the reward of having this support will help you for many years to come.

How can I help others with dementia?

There are initiatives happening at every level across Canada. In 2019, the federal government released a national dementia strategy focusing on preventing dementia, advancing therapies, finding a cure and improving the quality of life for those living with dementia and their caregivers.

In Ontario, a large-scale dementia strategy continues to evolve today, with a focus on day-away programs, the Alzheimer Society's First Link Navigation, caregiver self-management and education courses, Behavioural Supports Ontario investments and more.

In a perfect world, these supports would be ready and waiting when needed, but there is unfortunately a waitlist for many of these services. Because of this, I think the best thing you can do to get help is to connect with your family, friends and local social groups.

Let them know of your diagnosis. Invite them to an education session about the disease and things that can

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Locally, the societies in Grey, Bruce, Huron and Perth continue to work hard to expand our programs and help serve the people in our communities. To help us, there are many opportunities.

You can volunteer at one of the programs or events, educate yourself and others about dementia, start a dementia-friendly initiative in your community or workplace, or help raise funds that stay local. Our IG Walk for Alzheimer's raises both funds and awareness, so please join us in May!

For more information, please don't hesitate to reach out to the Alzheimer Society of Grey-Bruce at 519-376-7230 or info@alzheimergreybruce.com.

Stephen Musehl is executive director of the Alzheimer Society of Grey-Bruce.

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