

Alzheimer's Awareness Month: What You Need to Know

Most of us know someone affected by Alzheimer's disease. More than 6 million people live with the disease, a figure that the Alzheimer's Association expects to more than double by 2050.

Alzheimer's Awareness Month shines a spotlight on the disease and how understanding it can improve the quality of life for people previously undiagnosed with Alzheimer's or other memory disorders.

What is Alzheimer's disease?

Dr. Michael Shain, a neuropsychologist with Lee Physician Group in its Memory Care Program, says Alzheimer's disease is a type of dementia that involves memory loss symptoms and cognitive decline significant enough to interfere with daily life.

"Alzheimer's disease isn't a normal part of aging," Dr. Shain says. "However, age is the biggest risk factor for Alzheimer's and mainly affects people over 65. A person's risk of developing the disease doubles about every five years."

Dr. Shain says that one in six people over 80 have dementia, and many of them have Alzheimer's.

"Alzheimer's disease and related dementias typically start with short-term memory loss," Dr. Shain says. "Early symptoms are warning signs of a potential problem, such as increased forgetfulness of recent events or recent difficulty managing daily tasks."

"Oftentimes, others may notice a person having memory problems, but that person may not notice it themselves."

Warning signs and symptoms of Alzheimer's

In addition to memory problems, someone Alzheimer's disease may experience one or more of the following symptoms:

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life, such as getting lost in a familiar place or repeating questions.
- Trouble handling money and paying bills.
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure.
- Decreased or poor judgment.
- Misplacing things and being unable to retrace steps to find them.
- Changes in mood, personality, or behavior.

Dr. Shain stresses that these symptoms don't necessarily mean someone has Alzheimer's disease.

"When assessing memory loss, it's important to have a complete evaluation to rule out any treatable conditions," he says. "A variety of manageable conditions—including stroke, vascular disease, toxins, nutritional deficiencies, infections and depression—can affect memory and cognition."

Early diagnosis: Stay proactive

A thorough evaluation by the Memory Care team of specialists—which includes geriatric providers and a neuropsychologist—can determine if dementia is a factor in behavioral issues.

Dr. Shain says Alzheimer's disease slowly worsens over time, so early diagnosis is essential.

"We interact with patients very early in the disease progression, when impairment is typically mild," he says. "Working together with a patient's family doctor, our program ensures proper diagnosis and provides evaluations, treatment and family counseling.

"Presently, there's no cure for the disease. But there are medicines available to treat Alzheimer's, along with coping strategies to manage behavioral symptoms. Most medicines work best for people in the early or middle stages of the disease."

To schedule a consultation or make an appointment with Lee Health Memory Care, call 239-343-9220.

Lee Health's First Dementia-Friendly Facility: Coconut Point!

Lee Health Coconut Point (LHCP) continues to be on the cutting edge of patient care. And our medical campus just off US 41 in Estero was recently designated as "Dementia Friendly" by the Lee County Dementia Care and Cure Initiative (DCCI).

What does that mean? DCCI "Dementia-Friendly" facilities are certified as having the appropriate training and knowledge to effectively and compassionately care for patients with dementia.

More than 75 percent of LHCP's staff took part in training to gain a deeper understanding of this condition. This included lessons on identifying common signs and symptoms of dementia, how to effectively communicate with dementia patients and their families, and having resources on hand to assist community members affected by this type of diagnosis.

Employees are also trained to work with the families of dementia patients to provide support with day-to-day challenges. Approximately 720,000 Floridians will be living with Alzheimer's by 2025, and the expertise gained through these training programs prepares health care professionals to meet the special needs of dementia patients.

"I am proud of the initiative our team has shown to learn how to better care for their patients with dementia," says Alex Greenwood, vice president of Lee Health Coconut Point. "This was an employee-driven effort, and proactively seeking this designation speaks to the dedication they have for their patients and their families.

"Dementia patients require an added level of understanding, and we are committed to creating a comfortable environment for the delivery of their health care."

A celebration at LHCP: You're Invited!

Lee Health Coconut Point will host a celebration from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Nov. 9 to celebrate our Dementia-Friendly designation and provide dementia education to our community as part of Alzheimer's Awareness Month.

Experts from DCCI, Lee Health Memory Care, the Alzheimer's Association Brain Bus, Dubin Center and United Way: ReUnite will be available to answer questions and provide resources for living with dementia.

The event will feature two food trucks, and the cost of food for attendees has been covered by the Lee Health Foundation. The event is open to the public and will take place outdoors at Lee Health Coconut Point, 23450 Via Coconut Point, Bonita Springs.

Masks (except when eating or drinking) and social distancing are required. For more information, please email HealthyLifeCenter@LeeHealth.org