

Rx: Keep Your Brain Active

by Mary Jo Blackwood, R.N., MPH

Health improvement is often aimed at reducing risk factors for various diseases. For Alzheimer's disease (AD), the biggest risk factor is something we can't change—our age. The statistical risk for AD at age 65 is one in 10; by age 85, one in two.

The St. Louis Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association serves 38 counties in Missouri and Illinois. Nancy Litzau, director of communications and development for the Association, explains the scope of the problem.

"Within these 38 counties, we estimate there are 66,000 people with the disease, enough to fill the Edward Jones Dome," she says. "If you multiply them by one to three caregivers, that's 264,000 people directly affected."

Litzau says this information is meant to alert, not alarm. November is National Alzheimer's Awareness Month, so proclaimed by former President Ronald Reagan in 1983, years before he developed and succumbed to AD. Ninety percent of what doctors have learned about the disease has been discovered in the last 10 years.

The most current drugs were launched in 2000, and research is progressing at lightening speed. "We are hopeful to have a cure or the prevention key in the next 10 to 15 years, which would head it off for most of the baby boomers," Litzau says.

While we are waiting and supporting that research, there are things we can do for our own mental health. The Alzheimer's Association suggests we focus on brain (and general) health: stay physically active; eat a healthy diet low in

fat and high in antioxidants, like those found in blueberries and broccoli; socialize and stay active with other people; and do new things to challenge the brain. Knitting, crossword puzzles and learning a foreign language are all healthy challenges. All help develop new neural pathways.

Alzheimer's Association services are mostly free. "We have a 24-hour help line accessible in 140 languages, support groups, literature and educational programs," Litzau explains. "Many of the volunteers manning the help line are former caregivers and can relate to callers."

One of those help line volunteers is Ralph Covinsky, who cared for his wife at home until she succumbed to the disease. "I was fortunate in an unfortunate situation," he says. "She was diagnosed a year after our 50th anniversary and died four years later. The last year and a



photo courtesy of 'The Canyon Ranch Guide to Living Younger Longer'

half we lived with my daughter and son-in-law. They had a complete apartment built for us on the lower level of their new home."

Covinsky's daughter and son made sure he got out to play golf or visit friends occasionally. His three grown grandchildren also checked in frequently. "Since I'm one of the few men on the help line, I support other male caregivers, in particular," he says. "They are sometimes more comfortable asking me questions about how to handle

different situations." Covinsky has several tips for caregivers:

- ◆ Join a support group to help you through difficult times.
- ◆ Learn patience. You have to adjust to the patient because he or she can't adjust to you.
- ◆ Safety-proof the home.
- ◆ Ask for help from your church, support group or the AA, and talk to people who have been through it. Use the help line. Sometimes family

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members are in denial.

◆Be tough when it comes to driving. Patients with early Alzheimer's think they can drive, but they don't have the proper judgment.

◆Get the patient to a neurologist for a diagnosis. It will help the family deal with the situation.

One new service in St. Louis, Memory Care Home Solutions, helps caregivers function by taking care of them and their loved ones. President and founder Lisa Baron says they provide assessment, training and information to help caregivers adapt their home and interactions.

This new service has just completed successful pilot sessions and is now accepting caregiver classes from the general public. The programs, available on a modest sliding scale, have several unique features:

◆In-home consultation before the class starts to observe interaction patterns between patient

and caregiver, correct obvious safety problems and understand the environment in which the interactions take place.

◆Classes take place in a home-like setting with usually no more than five caregivers in a class for six 90-minute sessions, or nine hours of training over 12 weeks. Class topics include how memory impairment affects function; coping with behaviors like hoarding and wandering; dementia-proofing your home; communicating with the dementia patient; keeping the loved one involved in daily activities; and taking care of yourself (caregiver stress issues).

◆Follow-up in-home visits to evaluate whether changes were implemented.

Caregivers and potential clients can attend an open house at the two training apartments: Crown Center in University City on Oct. 27; Covenant House in Creve Coeur on Nov. 2. Two new training facilities are under development at Bethesda Dilworth and Sanford Brown Hazelwood Campus. **LN**