Editorial

Degenerative Diseases of the Brain: On the Rise

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Editor

What do we understand by the term degenerative diseases of the brain? The first and foremost word that comes to mind is Dementia. First, let's take a look at what exactly is dementia? Dementia is not a specific disease. It's an overall term that describes a wide range of symptoms associated with a decline in memory or other thinking skills severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities. Alzheimer's disease accounts for 60 to 80 percent of cases. Vascular dementia, which occurs after a stroke, is the second most common dementia type. But there are many other conditions that can cause symptoms of dementia, including some that are reversible, such as thyroid problems and vitamin deficiencies.

Dementia is often incorrectly referred to as "senility" or "senile dementia," which reflects the formerly widespread but incorrect belief that serious mental decline is a normal part of aging.

While symptoms of dementia can vary greatly, at least two of the following core mental functions must be significantly impaired to be considered dementia:

- Memory
- Communication and language
- Ability to focus and pay attention
- Reasoning and judgment
- Visual perception

People with dementia may have problems with short-term memory, keeping track of a purse or wallet, paying bills, planning and preparing meals, remembering appointments or traveling out of the neighborhood. Many dementias are progressive, meaning symptoms start out slowly and gradually get worse.

Now, with that being taken care of, let us take a look at the most common cause of dementia, Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's is the leading cause of dementia worldwide, and as of late, cases of early onset Alzheimer's have been on the rise. Alzheimer's is not a normal part of aging. The greatest known risk factor is increasing age, and the majority of people with Alzheimer's are 65 and older. But Alzheimer's is not just a disease of old age. Approximately 200,000 Americans under the age of 65 have younger-onset Alzheimer's disease (also known as early-onset Alzheimer's). Alzheimer's worsens over time. Alzheimer's is a progressive disease, where dementia symptoms gradually worsen over a number of years. In its early stages, memory loss is mild, but with late-stage Alzheimer's, individuals lose the ability to carry on a conversation and respond to their environment. Those with Alzheimer's live an average of eight years after their symptoms become noticeable to others, but survival can range from four to 20 years, depending on age and other health conditions. Alzheimer's has no current cure, but treatments for symptoms are available and research continues. Although current Alzheimer's treatments cannot stop Alzheimer's from progressing, they can temporarily slow the worsening of dementia symptoms and improve quality of life for those with Alzheimer's and their caregivers. Today, there is a worldwide effort under way to find better ways to treat the disease, delay its onset, and prevent it from developing.

As of right now, a mere handful of risk factors are recognised when it comes to Alzheimer's, namely, age, family history and genetics, all of which are not readily modifiable. But there are some things that you can do to try to decrease the risk of developing the disease if you happen to have a genetic or family background of Alzheimer's.

1. Head injury: There may be a strong link between serious head injury and future risk of Alzheimer's, especially when trauma occurs repeatedly or involves loss of consciousness. Protect your brain by buckling your seat belt, wearing your helmet when participating in sports, and "fall-proofing" your home.
2. Heart-head connection: Some of the strongest evidence links brain health to heart health. This connection makes sense, because the brain is nourished by one of the body's richest networks of blood vessels, and the heart is responsible for pumping blood through these blood vessels to the brain. The risk of developing Alzheimer's or vascular dementia appears to be increased by many conditions that damage the heart and blood vessels. These include heart disease, diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Work with your doctor to monitor your heart health and treat any problems that arise.
3. Overall healthy aging: One promising line of research suggests that strategies for overall healthy aging may help keep the brain healthy and may even reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's. These measures include eating a healthy diet, staying socially active, avoiding tobacco and excess alcohol, and exercising both the body and mind.

So, in the end, the lesson to take away from this is, that regardless of having a family history of Alzheimer's, living an overall healthy lifestyle, might just do the trick and keep Alzheimer's away.