



Could it be Alzheimer's? Reduce the Risk / September 2011

September 21 is World Alzheimer's Day. Many of us have been touched by Alzheimer's disease. We have witnessed the progression from the occasional loss of memory through to the later stages. Perhaps we have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia ourselves.

You are not alone. According to the Alzheimer Society of Canada, half a million Canadians have Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia, and if nothing changes, that number is expected to double within 25 years.

Yes. It is a scary reality. True, there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease at the moment. However, there is good news to share. A growing amount of evidence shows that lifestyle choices may in fact reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.

According to the Alzheimer Society of Canada "Alzheimer's disease develops when the risk factors for the disease combine and reach a level that overwhelms the brain's ability to maintain and repair itself. So reducing as many of the risk factors that you can makes good sense." While some risk factors are beyond our control - such as aging and genetics - many more are tied into our day to day lifestyle choices.

To hammer home the point, or should I say opportunity for wellness, studies of identical twins (who share the same genes) show that approximately 60 per cent of the overall risk of sporadic Alzheimer's disease comes from lifestyle and not from genes. It's not all doom and gloom after all. Just because my father or mother had Alzheimer's disease does not mean I'm on a similar path of progression.

Take note. Regardless of your current health status it's a good idea to follow the tips below. Not only will taking action benefit your brain, some of these tips are proven to reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes ... to name a few.

Challenge your brain. By stimulating your brain in new and different ways you engage new or little used mental pathways. That would be a good thing. Play a game of chess, do a crossword, learn a new language, write with the opposite hand. It doesn't need to be a difficult task. Simply find a different way of doing something. Give your brain a new experience.

Be socially active. Research also shows that people who interact with others on a regular basis maintain their brain function better than those who don't. Get out and volunteer, join a seniors club, invite some friends over to taste your latest culinary creation.

Follow Canada's Food Guide. I like to think rainbow - blueber-

ries, broccoli, butternut squash ... you know the spectrum. Simply put, the constant reminder from our mom's to eat our vegetables sits amidst the best advice we'll ever get. It's also a good idea to choose lower fat dairy products, leaner meats, go for the whole grain options and eat foods rich in omega-3 oils such as salmon and walnuts.

Be physically active. Exercise promotes the circulation of blood to the brain and may even encourage the development of new cells. If you are not active at the moment it is important to remember that any amount of physical activity can bring some health benefits.

Reduce stress. Take time for yourself; get plenty of sleep. Better yet ... practice altering your internal reaction to the stresses in your life. Meditation, deep breathing, massage and physical exercise are all examples of stress reduction techniques.

Protect your head. Research also shows that there is an increased risk of Alzheimer's among those who have had a brain injury or concussions ... bringing a whole new meaning to the term "play safe."

Avoid smoking, recreational drugs, excessive alcohol consumption.

See your doctor and keep your "numbers" in the healthy range. For example, monitor cholesterol, weight, blood sugar and blood pressure.

What else can you do?

Know the signs. Warning signs to watch for (as developed by the Alzheimer Society of Canada) include memory loss that affects day-to-day function; difficulty performing familiar tasks; problems with language; disorientation of time and place; poor or decreased judgment; problems with abstract thinking; misplacing things; changes in mood and behaviour; changes in personality; and or loss of initiative.

While the prospect of having Alzheimer's is a scary one it should be noted that many people with Alzheimer's disease live meaningful active lives. They do not feel that a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease signals an end to their life.

If you or someone you know is experiencing the early signs of Alzheimer's contact the Alzheimer Society of Muskoka at 705-645-5621. They are our communities "go to" on the matter.

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