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Alzheimer's more likely to affect women than men

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Local facilities that care for patients with Alzheimer's disease find that a recently released report about how the disease affects women is consistent with what they see.



According to the Alzheimer's Association 2014 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures report, women are affected by the disease – a type of dementia that causes problems with memory, thinking and behavior – in more ways than men.

"The ratio of females (at Magnolia Village) is greater than the number of males. Not only do you see the women have the disease, we see that women are greater affected by the disease through caregiving," said Laura Hall, director of admissions at Magnolia Village. "That is why it's so vitally important that females understand the importance of taking care of themselves or finding ways to reduce stress."

The report says that a woman's estimated lifetime risk of developing Alzheimer's disease by age 65 is one in six, compared with nearly one in 11 for a man.

In fact, women in their 60s are about twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's over the rest of their lives as they are to develop breast cancer. According to the National Cancer Institute, a 60-year-old woman has a remaining lifetime risk of breast cancer of one in 11, said Teri Shirk, executive director of the Kentucky and Southern Indiana Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association.

"I think that's striking for people because people are incredibly concerned about breast cancer, as they should be, but I think people are (not as concerned) about Alzheimer's," she said.

The biggest factor is that women live longer than men, Shirk said.

"Their chance of living beyond 85 is higher, so the incidence of the disease is higher," she said.

Women are two-thirds as likely to be the caregiver, Shirk said.

Theresa McFarlin, executive director of Chandler Assisted Living and Chandler Memory Care and a certified dementia practitioner, agreed.

"Women are generally the natural nurturer. The majority of them work and may raise a family and care for a spouse or older parent," she said. "There's depression and a feeling of being isolated. They really don't take the time for their own health concerns so a lot of time their needs will go unattended because they're caring for another person."

According to the report, there are 5.2 million people living with the disease – 67,000 of those are in Kentucky. The state number is expected to rise to 86,000 by 2025.

"If at 80 you have Alzheimer's, you have a 75 percent chance of being in a nursing home versus 4 percent if you don't have Alzheimer's," Shirk said. "If you're 80 (without the disease), you're going to live with friends, family or on your own."

Baby boomers are reaching the age when they are developing the disease, McFarlin said.

"We know more than we did when their parents got the disease," she said.

The number of people with Alzheimer's may be even higher because people aren't diagnosed properly, if at all, or don't go to the doctor, Shirk said. People may die of disease-related complications.

"A lot of times a person will die of pneumonia, but they really died of complications of Alzheimer's," she said. "The body is not functioning properly because the brain is not functioning properly."

Another risk of Alzheimer's is wandering. About 60 percent of those with Alzheimer's wander, Shirk said.

"If someone died of exposure, the coroner would say they died of exposure," she said. "If (Alzheimer's) was recorded as a cause of death, reports would be higher."

The cost of health care affects not only the loved one with Alzheimer's, but also their caregivers. The report says that in 2013, 267,000 friends and family members provided 304 million hours of unpaid care valued at \$3.8 billion in the commonwealth. Kentucky caregivers' health care costs are \$155 million higher due to the stress of caregiving.

"In terms of in the U.S., cost of health care for individuals that are caregivers is significantly higher. The cost for us as a country is high because (the caregivers) have to go to the doctor more often," Shirk said.

Alzheimer's is the most expensive condition in the nation, the report says. The total cost of caring for people with that and other dementias is projected to reach \$214 billion, which was \$203 billion in 2013. This includes \$150 billion for Medicare and Medicaid, \$36 billion in out-of-pocket costs and \$28 billion from insurance and other sources.

"A nursing home costs \$85,000 to \$95,000 a year," Shirk said. "What happens is that folks go through their own financial assets and then qualify for Medicaid and Medicare."

Maintaining a healthy brain

While there is no cure for Alzheimer's, there are ways to maintain brain health.

"Physical activity helps the blood flow. Stay physically active," Hall said. "A healthy low fat, low cholesterol diet is suggested. Do mentally stimulating activities. Crossword puzzles are a fun way to stimulate the brain."

Vascular complications lead to dementia pretty often, McFarlin said. It's also important to rule out other causes of dementia-like symptoms.

"It's important to determine what type and cause – vascular, genetic, Parkinson's-related. When you can better determine the cause ... then maybe we can prolong the progression through medication," he said. "A lot of times people don't recognize the symptoms early enough. The earlier you recognize the symptoms, the better the outcome is. Know your family history. Control your blood pressure and cholesterol. We just hope to for a cure someday."

Research is the only way to find a cure or slow down the progression of the disease, Shirk said.

"We need to invest in research on a national and global level," she said. "We need to increase the commitment to the disease nationally. All you need to get Alzheimer's is a brain."

— For more information about Alzheimer's, call 800-272-3900 or visit alz.org.

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