

DEMENTIA SCREENING

As persons grow older, the reality of dementia grows larger. Most people over the age of 50 have a friend or relative who suffers from dementia or serves as a caregiver. Many baby boomers are now asking the question “What would I do if I thought that I had Alzheimer’s disease?” Most individuals over age 50 experience minor difficulties with their memory and this change may produce anxiety in the middle-aged or older person. Minor memory difficulties may produce major anxiety in an individual with personal experience in dementia. Everyday people who are caught in this quandary have several questions that need answers. First, “how do I know if my memory difficulty is normal aging or evidence of some other serious problem”? Second, “how can have my memory screened”? Third, “what happens if the testing is positive, and how can I use this experience to improve my intellectual fitness”?

Memory complaints are common as people grow older. Normal individuals over the age of 50 often experience difficulty processing large amounts of information; however, their overall memory function is relatively intact and the memory difficulties do not disrupt their life. Forgetting one or two things at the grocery store or using a palm-pilot for reminders is expected as you grow older. Forgetting most of your grocery items at the store or getting into trouble at work because you forget important tasks is evidence that serious memory difficulties may be occurring.

Our nation presently lacks a national policy on memory screening. The Alzheimer’s Foundation of America has proposed to Congress a plan to introduce memory screening as an everyday part of life. Common acceptance of memory screens will reduce anxiety associated with having the test performed. Accurate memory screening can be performed in as little as 12 minutes using standardized tests. The screening is painless, cheap, and effective when performed by trained persons. Many AFA affiliates are performing memory screens and their experience is uniformly positive. Studies of screening programs show that the public appreciates the service and responds well to either a negative or positive testing. A positive screen does not confirm a diagnosis of dementia and the program should include referral to appropriate clinicians for further evaluation. Many healthcare problems can reduce memory capacity and mimic dementia. The screening provides advice to the person on whether they should seek further evaluation to assess loss of intellectual function. A normal screen is good news to the person and their family. The identification of normal memory function provides an opportunity for the use of an intellectual wellness program for older persons. AFA has designed a series of recommendations that may assist people with successful aging. Basic steps, such as control of hypertension, responsible drinking, informed consumption of medications, intellectual stimulation, as well as other activities may reduce the risk of speed of onset for dementia.

The value of early recognition and treatment for dementia is clear. Some medical problems such as adverse reactions to medications, depression, thyroid disease, and others can mimic dementia. An adequate evaluation can identify and treat these common healthcare problems. Patients with early dementia or mild cognitive impairment benefit

the most from medication that slow the progression of the disease. Mild, cognitive impairment is an isolated memory problem with otherwise intact, intellectual function. Most persons with MCI develop dementia over a 5-year period, but about 20% do not. The early recognition of cognitive impairment allows the person to fully use available medications that slow the progress of the disease.

Forgetful, older persons benefit at multiple levels from early recognition. Early dementia is often stressful for the person with intellectual decline and psychological assistance can help reduce anxiety and depression. Mildly demented persons are able to determine the future course of their legal matters, healthcare decisions, and long-term care options. Early recognition affords those individuals an opportunity for self-determination and maximum autonomy. Unrecognized persons with dementia may suffer accidents or medical complications because they are unable to remember health-related symptoms or physicians' instructions for important healthcare issues. Persons with mild dementia are at greater risk for severe confusion from minor health problems such as bladder infections and the flu. The condition is called "delirium" and this complication is common in hospitalized elders. Recognition of this disorder allows the family caregiver to exercise additional support when the mildly demented person is sick or hospitalized.

Many different forms of dementia screening are available including direct face-to-face contact, over the telephone, via mail outs, and on the internet. Most of these techniques are highly effective and cost-efficient. AFA prefers that screenings be conducted in a face-to-face manner in order to discuss the findings and reassure the person who may have an abnormal test. Research shows that most persons with adequate testing and counseling will seek follow-up for their memory trouble. AFA believes that human contact and the human touch is always a preferable form of care.

Some individuals are concerned about screening because they do not know whether a physician is available who can perform additional studies. Any neurologist, psychiatrist, geriatric specialist or primary care clinician with appropriate training can assess and treat dementia. A basic dementia assessment requires about one hour of the doctor's time. This can be split up over several sessions. AFA is promoting the concept that every American is entitled to access care from a clinician with adequate expertise in dementia to assure accurate diagnosis and treatment. The Foundation contends that our healthcare system will continue to be deficient until it meets the basic needs of all citizens with intellectual decline throughout the country. All Americans are entitled to basic cognitive healthcare.

Memory screening provides a unique opportunity to healthcare consumers. Individuals with normal intellect benefit because they can receive a powerful, wellness message that may afford some protection against the onset of dementia. Persons with early dementia benefit from access to the best available medications that slow the progress of their disease as well as the opportunity to exercise self-determination and protection. Memory screenings should be used throughout our country and the older person should be as familiar with the memory test as they are with the blood pressure cuff.