

Alzheimer's symptoms often ignored

WATERLOO REGION — One out of two people delay seeking help for dementia symptoms a year or more, most often because they shrugged off the memory problems as a normal part of aging.

Denial was found to be a common reason for delayed diagnosis in a recent Alzheimer Society of Canada survey.

“You sort of hope this is just a bad time and things will get better,” said Carol Taylor, executive director for Cambridge chapter of the Alzheimer Society.

Just over half of those surveyed believed the symptoms were part of old age and would go away. Almost 40 per cent said their symptoms were episodic or didn't take them seriously. About a quarter either refused to see a doctor or didn't see a need to go until symptoms worsened.

“It does reveal people aren't getting diagnosed as early as they could be,” Taylor said.

She was surprised at the high numbers of people waiting to see their family doctor when dementia symptoms emerge. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia.

“I thought it would have been fewer people because there's so much awareness around dementia now,” Taylor said.

January is Alzheimer's awareness month. The two local chapters are hosting a free public forum on the genetics of Alzheimer's disease in Kitchener later this month.

In Waterloo Region, about 6,000 to 7,000 have Alzheimer's. Half a million are diagnosed in Canada, although more don't know they have the disease.

Warning signs of Alzheimer's disease:

- Memory loss that affects day-to-day functioning
- 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
- Loss of initiative

Early diagnosis can make a huge difference for a dementia patient and their family.

“An early diagnosis leads to a better life,” Taylor said.

The majority of caregivers polled wished they sought a diagnosis sooner to access treatment and manage symptoms. Taylor said medication reduces symptoms and lifestyle choices can ease the disease’s early stage.

“Exercise and social engagement really, really are beneficial to a good quality of life,” Taylor said.

Connecting with the Alzheimer Society can also help people understand the disease and how to cope, along with providing support. People also have time to get their legal and financial affairs in order and help with the planning for their future care, Taylor said, “rather than waiting for the illness to take over their lives.”

Doctors are better at diagnosing the disease and memory clinics at local family health teams are specially trained to detect mild cognitive impairment. Age is the largest risk factor for Alzheimer’s disease, but a healthy diet, regular exercise, a rich social life and learning new things can also offer some protection against the fatal, progressive and degenerative disease that destroys brain cells, Taylor said.

“We know now that there’s things people can do to reduce the risk.”

Event information

Learn about the genetics of Alzheimer’s disease at a free forum on Jan. 24 from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the Holiday Inn on Fairway Rd. S. A genetic counselor will talk about the role of genetics in the disease, who is at risk and genetic testing and its impact. Although the event is free, registration is required by Jan. 18. Call 519-742-1422 or 519-650-1628.

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