

A clearer picture of aging brains can help

*By Ellen Waldman
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This past month, there was a free, online Zoom series called “Community Health and You,” co-sponsored by Asante and Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. The topics were presented by medical professionals, experts in their field of study.

The last two talks in this series were “Neuroimaging and the Older Adult” and “Memory and Aging.” Here is some new information you might consider if these topics are of interest to you.

David Tullar, a physician assistant with specialized expertise in Behavioral Neurology, spoke about memory issues involving aging adults, a topic most people find concerning. He reminded everyone of the importance of early detection of any cognitive impairment or dementia. There are many important reasons why early diagnosis of these conditions is important, and here are two ways to do this.

It’s often recommended to have neurological imaging, as presented by Nathan Mortensen, a diagnostic radiologist with Medford Radiology Group. This gives a clear image and literal picture of what’s going on in the brain. These studies are ordered by your primary medical provider or a specialist, if one is involved in your care. These studies show what’s actually taking place in the brain, and they greatly aid in diagnosis.

The other early diagnostic tool is a full evaluation by a neuropsychologist. There are several local offices providing this service. Here are two of them: Southern Oregon Neuropsychological Clinic, soneuroclinic.com, in Medford, and Dr. Brad S. Kauder, drbradkauder.com, in Ashland. Medicare usually pays a large portion of this evaluation, if referred by your doctor.

Here are some surprising facts. There is not always a serious cognitive problem indicated by a slower pace of doing a task. In fact, even as speed slows, accuracy is preserved in most older adults. You might be worrying about your speed, but this change is more normal than you’d expect. Also, although 25%-30% of healthy older adults complain of memory loss, only 9% will have dementia three to four years later.

However, if a family member or someone else notices and is worried about your decline, the rate of it actually being Alzheimer’s disease climbs to 12% per year. This indicates that, many times, you might have a less accurate view than those around you. By age 85, however, 40% of healthy adults will have dementia in four years, even if they have had no complaints. Most signs of dementia will appear in this age group.

If it turns out this is your diagnosis, Tullar suggests there are nonmedication treatments that can help, and might even be as effective as most medications. They are the familiar methods suggested to address other medical conditions and general good health habits: regular physical exercise, the Mediterranean diet — which provides significant benefit in this disease — avoiding social isolation and adjusting activities to meet each person’s cognitive capacity. Something that might be overlooked far too often is taking care of the caregiver.

The reason this last point is so important is that we are all mirrors of each other's emotions. People with dementia seem to really home in on this to gauge their own emotional states.

Many times, the caregiver needs to be receiving some personal support to remain on an even keel. So the better care the caregiver is receiving, the more relaxed they'll be, and that in turn helps their person feel more relaxed.

It's always a good idea to have realistic expectations of ourselves as caregivers, our loved ones with dementia and those providing services to us. Makes life better all around.