

# African Americans and Alzheimer's



## *Alzheimer's disease – the words strike fear in the hearts of many older Americans.*

A disease that leaves no survivors, Alzheimer's destroys brain cells causing memory changes and loss of body functions. It is fatal and the sixth leading cause of death in America.

African Americans are twice as likely as whites to have Alzheimer's. This is due to the prevalence of high blood pressure and diabetes in the African American population – two conditions that contribute to the risk of Alzheimer's disease.

### **Risk Factors**

“Researchers have discovered that the development of the disease is caused by a build up of proteins in the brain,” says Sam Hutchison, MSW, LCSW, a social worker and office manager at Cape Fear Valley Senior Health Services. “These proteins develop into plaques and tangles, which can be observed in the brains of patients who have died from the disease.”

Age increases one's risk for Alzheimer's greatly. Most Alzheimer's patients are 65 or older. And the risk of developing the disease doubles every five years after age 65. According to the Alzheimer's Association, after age 85, the risk of developing Alzheimer's reaches 50 percent. Genetics is also a factor; those with a parent, sibling or child with Alzheimer's are more likely to develop the disease themselves.

We can't control our genes, and growing older is inevitable, but there are measures we can take to lessen our risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.

“Having a diagnosis of hypertension, diabetes, coronary artery disease, previous stroke, or any disease that effects the blood vessels in the body puts patients at a greater risk for developing some form of dementia,” warns Hutchison.

Therefore if you have any of these conditions, or are at risk for developing any of these conditions, it is important to consult your physician.

Brain health is very closely linked to heart health. With every beat of your heart, approximately 25 percent of your blood is sent to your brain cells. Keeping your heart healthy will help ensure a healthy blood supply to your brain and will lessen your Alzheimer's risk. Meet with your physician to discuss a heart-healthy diet and methods to maintain good cardiovascular health.

Protecting your brain can also lessen your risk of Alzheimer's. Tests indicate that many have developed Alzheimer's because of a serious head trauma in their past. Wear your seatbelt at all times. When biking

or playing sports, wear the proper head protection and “fall proof” your home to lessen your risk for head trauma.

### **Signs & Symptoms**

While a person's memory can grow less sharp as he or she grows older, drastic memory loss is not a normal part of the aging process. If you or a loved one is forgetting recently learned information, important dates or events and asking the same questions repeatedly, you may be displaying signs of Alzheimer's disease.

Other warning signs include:

- Trouble following plans or instructions, such as a familiar recipe
- Trouble driving to a familiar location or completing other familiar tasks
- Confusing times and places – forgetting how you got somewhere or where you are
- Difficulty keeping up with conversations
- Changes in mood or personality
- Trouble understanding visual images, for example having difficulty reading, judging distance or determining colors.

“Early detection of this disease is important. However many people are afraid to bring this subject up with their physician,” says Hutchison. “Any changes in memory, personality, or loss of functioning should be reported to your physician. Just because you have memory loss does not mean that you have Alzheimer's. There may be other causes of these symptoms and your physician can rule these out before considering a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or dementia.”

Join Cape Fear Valley Health at the Holiday Inn I-95 on Cedar Creek Road, as we partner with the Forget Me Not Project to raise public awareness regarding Alzheimer's Disease.

### **Saturday, April 16**

**Forget Me Not Prayer Breakfast, 9 a.m.**, featuring: Elder Jametta Moore, and local Pastors and Ministry Leaders. *Free of charge.*

**Forget Me Not Health Fair, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.**, featuring Bernadette Stanis, Thelma of “Good Times.” Enjoy exhibits, health screenings seminars and more. *Free of charge.*

**Garrett Davis' Inspirational Play Forget Me Not, 4 p.m. and 8 p.m.**, featuring award-winning playwright Garrett Davis, Tony Award Nominee Samantha McSwain, Kynya Milam and Darren McGill. *Tickets are \$20.*