

Q&A: Alzheimer's disease basics and what you can do to prevent it

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Alzheimer's disease is feared by many—and for good reason. The brain disorder slowly destroys memory along with a person's ability to reason, speak, carry out daily tasks and recognize loved ones. To date, there's no cure. The good news, however, is that there are steps you can take to lessen your chances of developing Alzheimer's disease, and promising possibilities for treating it, experts say.

Dr. Krishnankutty Sathian, a neurologist and chair of neurology at Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, shared some information about the disease and talked about [current treatments](#) and his hopes for the future. He also offered some advice for lessening your

chances of getting Alzheimer's disease.

Exactly what is Alzheimer's disease?

It is the most common form of dementia, a disorder that causes [memory loss](#) and impairment of other cognitive abilities to a degree that interferes with daily life, Sathian said.

Alzheimer's disease is progressive, explained Sathian. Often, it develops in the brain decades before it's diagnosed. Alzheimer's disease leads to tissue loss and the death of nerve cells throughout the brain and causes the brain to shrink dramatically over time. On average, a person with Alzheimer's lives eight to 10 years after being diagnosed, but depending on the rate of progression and other factors can live much longer.

What causes it?

While the exact causes of Alzheimer's disease aren't fully understood, scientists believe that for most people it is caused by a combination of age-related changes to the brain and genetic, environmental and lifestyle factors, Sathian said. More than 70% of patients with Alzheimer's are 75 years or older.

What can you do to minimize your chances of getting Alzheimer's disease?

Participating regularly in [aerobic exercise](#), consuming a diet rich in fruits and vegetables with limited amounts of red meat, and controlling [risk factors](#) such as [high blood pressure](#) or diabetes are key steps to lessening chances of developing Alzheimer's disease, Sathian said.

"Those are things that everyone should be doing, starting at an early

age," he said. "The earlier you start, the better."

At least 30 minutes of exercise five days a week is recommended, and Sathian advised following the Mediterranean diet, a heart-healthy diet that emphasizes healthy fats, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts and seeds. Controlling [blood pressure](#), cholesterol and diabetes also is important, and engaging in activities that boost cognitive skills may be helpful.

How prevalent is Alzheimer's disease?

An estimated 6.7 million Americans age 65 and older are living with Alzheimer's disease, which is listed as the sixth leading cause of death in the U.S. Two-thirds of Alzheimer's patients are women, and Black and Hispanic people are more likely to develop the disease than white people. Reasons for those discrepancies are not well understood, said Sathian.

What is early-onset Alzheimer's disease?

Early-onset Alzheimer's affects people in their 30s to mid-60s. It's very rare and usually caused by gene changes passed down from parent to child, Sathian explained. The early-onset form of the disease may cause fewer memory issues than late-onset but can prominently affect mental skills such as executive function and visuospatial orientation.

What treatments are available?

While no cure for Alzheimer's disease has been developed, research has developed some treatments that may help with symptoms and slow the progression of the disease, Sathian said.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved several [prescription drugs](#), the latest being lecanemab, a disease-modifying treatment for early-stage Alzheimer's that was approved in July.

"It shows some benefits in slowing the progression of the disease," Sathian said of the newly approved drug. "It's the first real disease-modifying medication that we've seen. Mind you, the benefits were modest, but patients who took it progressed at a slower rate than those who did not."

Medications, including lecanemab, have potentially serious side effects, however, which should be carefully considered before choosing to use them.

"The patient and family have to talk and decide on a course of action. What's right for one patient may not be right for another," Sathian said.

Will there be a cure for Alzheimer's disease?

No one knows if there will one day be a cure, but Sathian is optimistic about future treatments and testing for the disease. As experts gain understanding about how Alzheimer's disease progresses and affects the brain, they are able to work on new treatments with the potential to affect the disease process.

"I'm really hopeful," Sathian said. "We're ushering in a new era as all the research people have been doing for decades is starting to bear fruit. Even if we can't cure it, there are likely to be treatments that emerge that can prolong meaningful life."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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