

MEMORY LOSS AND OLDER ADULTS*By Debbie Anderson, director of Senior Care, Overlake Hospital Medical Center*

If you are worried about a family member who seems to be struggling with memory loss and confusion, you are not alone. It is a frightening and difficult experience for the whole family, particularly before there is clarity about the cause. The most important first step in helping an older adult with this issue is to visit a primary care physician for a complete medical assessment. There are multiple possible causes for memory loss and some ailments can be quickly and effectively treated.

Within a matter of hours, an independent and high-functioning older adult can become confused, inattentive and disoriented because of delirium. This condition can be caused by something as simple as a urinary tract infection, and a return to normal function is possible after a course of antibiotic treatment. Some medications can trigger delirium, as can dehydration, other infections, poor nutrition and lack of sleep. A significant number of elderly patients experience delirium during a hospital stay, particularly following surgery. The goal is to reorient the person to time and place, provide any normally used glasses and hearing aids, and offer good nutrition and uninterrupted sleep. If your older loved one is hospitalized and experiences short-term delirium, bring in personal items from home to provide comfort, like a favorite pillow or blanket. Massage can also help relax patients. Ask your caregiving staff what other steps can be taken to help reduce delirium.

Dementia is another condition altogether. This is a slow, progressive decline in mental function, caused by a disease such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's or a stroke. As we all grow older, there is a normal shift in memory and speed of learning, but dementia is a much more serious loss of cognitive ability and it does worsen over time. Wonderful organizations like the Alzheimer's Association are hard at work funding and advocating for this devastating illness, but as our population ages, the numbers look alarming. In 2011,

**EXERCISE AND MENTAL HEALTH**

According to the Alzheimer's Association, aerobic exercise improves oxygen consumption, which benefits brain function. Aerobic fitness has been found to reduce brain cell loss in elderly subjects. Activities like walking, bicycling, gardening, tai chi and yoga for about 30 minutes daily are all valuable for mental and physical health.

the first of our 77 million baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964 will begin to turn 65, and there is a high correlation between age and risk for this disease. Currently, 4.5 million Americans have Alzheimer's. Without new paths to treatment or prevention, that number will skyrocket to nearly 8 million by 2025. Our local figures support this trend. The most significant percent increase is expected in the 85+ age cohort, which between 2004 and 2009 is expected to grow by 18 percent in King County.

One sensitive topic most families must face is the question of driving and dementia. Handling a motor vehicle requires an enormous amount of simultaneous cognitive and physical skills, including depth perception, reaction time, memory and judgment. The Puget Sound region is known for difficult driving situations involving heavy traffic, bridge backups, construction projects and distracted, busy drivers. For people suffering from Alzheimer's or a related disease, the complexities of driving can be underestimated, leading to potentially tragic circumstances. To preserve delicate family relationships, the decision to stop driving can often be best handled by

an objective and respected third party, such as the family doctor.

Depression is another illness that can affect an older adult's ability to manage daily tasks, and this can sometimes be mistaken for dementia. Difficulty concentrating, remembering and making decisions are all very typical signs of depression, and it can also go hand in hand with other serious illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer. Depression can and should be treated in older adults. If it is left untreated, it can delay recovery from other illness, and even worsen the outcome. A qualified physician can help determine the cause for memory and other cognitive or behavioral problems in an older adult, including diagnosing and effectively treating depression.

Once your loved one has a diagnosis of any cognitive decline, there is a wealth of support for learning the skills needed to manage a cognitive illness. There are many tried-and-true, practical ideas to support and help your loved one—and yourself.

For more information, visit the Alzheimer's Association Web site at www.alz.org or www.overlake.staywellknowledgebase.com.