

Is it a “Senior Moment” or Something More?

November is National Alzheimer’s Disease Awareness Month. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as many as five million Americans were living with Alzheimer’s disease in 2014 and that number is projected to nearly triple by 2060.

Charles Lawler, M.D., Internal/Geriatric Medicine Physician, OSF HealthCare

“Everyone has these forgetful moments that people call ‘senior moments’ where you walk into a room and forgot why you went in there. But I think bigger issues would be other cognitive domains, so if you’re paying your bills incorrectly or any other type of executive functioning where you’re struggling and you should be able to do it or you were able to do it a year or two ago. That could be an early sign that you might have some sort of dementia going on.” (:34)

In addition to these cognitive deficits, there are other signs that differentiate Alzheimer’s from other forms of dementia. According to the National Institute on Aging, someone with Alzheimer’s disease may also experience memory loss that disrupts daily life such as getting lost in a familiar place or misplacement of things and being unable to retrace steps to find them, decreased or poor judgment, and changes in mood or personality.

It is also important to know the difference between dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. According to the Alzheimer’s Association, dementia is a general term for a decline in mental ability severe enough to interfere with daily life. Alzheimer’s is the most common cause of dementia and is a specific disease.

Charles Lawler, M.D., Internal/Geriatric Medicine Physician, OSF HealthCare

“Usually there’s cognitive decline, and cognition is previously learned information that you should be able to use but the brain just isn’t good at getting it out anymore. One of the other domains that’s very prevalent is your memory. A lot of people have memory issues, and they don’t necessarily have dementia.” (:27)

So, when should you see a doctor? Dr. Lawler recommends talking to your doctor whenever you feel you are experiencing problems with your memory. However, he explains that a bigger indicator is when your loved ones notice a memory problem that you do not.

Charles Lawler, M.D., Internal/Geriatric Medicine Physician, OSF HealthCare

“Ironically a lot of people who think they have problems, studies have shown that they’re less likely to have problems. But if you notice a family member has difficulty with memory – if they’re repeating themselves, like asking the same question at dinner or if someone like your mom calls you on the phone and says the same thing that she said yesterday – then that would be a concern.” (:26)

There is not currently a cure for Alzheimer’s disease, but early detection allows therapy to begin and slow down the progression of memory and cognitive loss.

While many people try to hide their diagnosis from loved ones early on due to fearing a loss of independence or shame, the Alzheimer’s Association advises that accepting an Alzheimer’s diagnosis and getting support early can help restore balance to your life and give you a sense of accomplishment in your abilities as you continue to live with the disease. Dr. Lawler also recommends that family members of someone diagnosed with Alzheimer’s seek support as well.

Charles Lawler, M.D., Internal/Geriatric Medicine Physician, OSF HealthCare

“You can have Alzheimer’s for 12, 13 years and it’s a slow progressive disorder. A big part is helping the family cope and support systems, because it’s very difficult for someone to take care of someone with Alzheimer’s 24/7.” (:16)

Charles Lawler, M.D., Internal/Geriatric Medicine Physician, OSF HealthCare

“Having Alzheimer’s does not necessarily mean that you still can’t have quality of life – that you can’t function in society. You still have something to say, something to add. There’s a lot of in between when you get to that level and still having good quality of life.” (:21)

Learn more about dealing with cognitive declines or Alzheimer’s disease at <https://www.alz.org/>.