Question: My 75-year-old father has just been diagnosed with early Alzheimer's disease. I have noticed that he has been more forgetful over the last year or so, but I thought this was normal as you get older.

From Call and Post Health Desk

Question: My 75-year-old father has just been diagnosed with early Alzheimer's disease. I have noticed that he has been more forgetful over the last year or so, but I thought this was normal as you get older. The doctor wants to do some tests and start him on some medicine. Can you tell me more about Alzheimer's? Is there anything else we should be doing that might help him?

Answer: Dementia is defined in the Merck Manual as "a deterioration of intellectual function and other cognitive skills, leading to a decline in the ability to perform activities of daily living." Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia and, sadly, medical research has not yet found a way to reverse its effects, although some other forms of dementia are reversible.

Alzheimer's disease is only diagnosed after ruling out other potential causes through a fairly standard series of blood tests. Your father may also undergo tests conducted by a neuropsychologist — a specialist in the structure and function of the brain relative to specific psychological processes and behaviors. These tests also will provide baseline information about the level of cognitive impairment your father is experiencing. Unfortunately there are currently no definitive tests to diagnose Alzheimer's but some are on the horizon.

Classic Alzheimer's disease causes a chronic loss of previously acquired knowledge. This progressive loss of memory leads to behavioral changes and loss of decision-making abilities. The disease is more common in women and the incidence of developing it increases with age.

While Alzheimer's is a non-reversible, progressive disease, there are many things that can be done to mitigate its effects. Many studies are showing that early treatment with one of the Alzheimer's treatment drugs can slow the progression of the disease. Maintaining a healthy diet and using other medications, if necessary to control behavioral problems associated with the Alzheimer's, can benefit the patient.

To help a person with Alzheimer's maintain cognitive function, establish routines for the patient. Keep calendars and clocks visible. Keep lists and written instructions for using household items. Stress and anxiety can make memory worse so minimize situations and activities that cause these reactions. Early in the course of Alzheimer's, have a family meeting, with the patient present, to discuss his wishes for his future care. This discussion, while difficult to initiate, can make the road ahead much easier to navigate for everyone involved.

General medical questions can be sent to Martha A. Simpson, D.O., M.B.A., Ohio University College of Osteopathic Medicine, Communication Office, Athens, Ohio 45701, or familymedicine@oucom.ohiou.edu.
Please do not ask Dr. Simpson to diagnose a condition or provide personal medical advice. Medical information in Family Medicine'0 is provided as an educational service only and does not replace the judgment of your personal physician, who should be relied on to diagnose and recommend treatment for any medical conditions.