

Dementia: early diagnosis keeps lives from unraveling

At the Alzheimer Society of Dufferin County, people often say that they are experiencing some memory challenges and are wondering whether or not to be concerned.

It is important to find out what is normal and not normal when it comes to changes in our cognitive functioning. People think dementia happens only to older people, but it impacts younger people as well.

More than half the Canadians with dementia wait too long to be diagnosed, losing precious time when care and support can make a difference in their quality of life and avert unnecessary crises for their families.

People are not aware of the benefits of an early diagnosis. There is a mix of emotions around this issue and it often involves fear of the unknown, the stigma, the potential loss of independence, etc. It is important, even critical, to get any concerns checked out by a doctor. The issue could be due to a nutritional deficiency, depression, an undiagnosed infection, or other cause, all of which could be treated and reversed.

However, if the issue is caused by a progressive, degenerative dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease, an early diagnosis can provide you with the time to engage in treatments and strategies that can help slow down the progression, take advantage of meaningful learning opportunities for you and your family, to plan ahead and set priorities, and focus on your quality of life.

Early diagnosis keeps your life from unraveling, so it is important for anyone who is concerned about themselves or a family member to not let fear and stigma become a barrier to seeking help. People with dementia can live meaningful and productive lives for many years after an early diagnosis. Treatment of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias is typically most effective when started early in the disease process.

Getting diagnosed early opens the door to important information, resources and support through our local Alzheimer Society.

“Through the Alzheimer Society's First Link program, we work with doctors so individuals are referred to the program at the point of diagnosis,” said Jennifer McCallum, First Link coordinator at Alzheimer Dufferin. “To have a confirmed diagnosis puts control in the hands of the individuals. Once referred, education and support for them and their families help to ensure they will live the journey well.”

In the community we need to be supportive and help to eliminate the stigma, while treating persons with dementia with dignity and respect.

Learn the facts. Share your knowledge about dementia with others, including family and friends, especially if you hear something that isn't true. Talking about dementia lessens our fear and increases understanding.

Don't make assumptions. Dementia is a progressive disease and affects each person differently. A diagnosis doesn't mean the person will have to stop his or her daily routine.

The Alzheimer Society of Canada says that right now, 747,000 Canadians live with some form of dementia. By 2031, this number will top 1.4 million.

Visit the Alzheimer Society website at www.alzheimer.ca, to learn how to spot the signs of dementia, understand the benefits of a diagnosis and how to prepare for a doctor's visit.

Get social with the staff at Alzheimer Society Dufferin for the latest information on our events, photos and updates, and follow Twitter and Facebook.

For more information on this topic or the programs and services, call 519-941-1221 or contact Laurie Turza, Public Education Coordinator for the Alzheimer Society of Dufferin County, laurieturza@alzheimerdufferin.org