

Where Did I Put It?

An article on memory loss presented by the Watlington & Chalgrove PPG following a talk given to them by Dr E McManus

Introduction

It happens to all of us, particularly those of us on the wrong side of 50. You cannot remember where you left your keys, the name of the person you're happily chatting to has slipped your mind, you know you wanted to buy something in the supermarket but have no idea what it was. For most of us this occasional loss of memory is annoying but accepted as just part of getting older. In fact everyone over the age of 45 will experience some degree of memory loss, with women at a greater risk than men, although the chance of this developing into Dementia is only 5% for the over 65s and 20% for the over 80s.

There are 3 stages to memory loss:

- Normal impairment as one gets older
- Mild cognitive impairment i.e. greater than would be expected for one's age
- Dementia

Dementia is not a disease in itself but a description of symptoms which include:

- Loss of memory
- Changes in mood
- Problems in communicating and with reasoning

How Do Doctors Decide if a Patient Has Dementia?

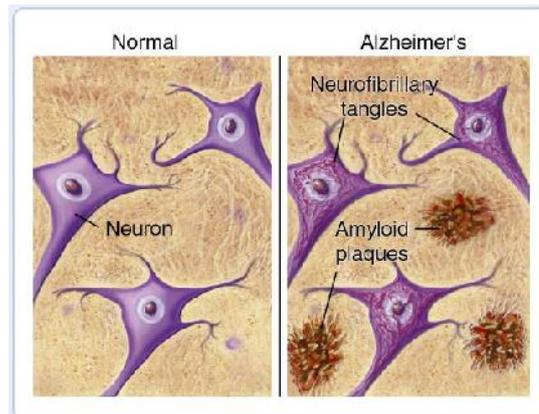
GPs use one of three assessment tests to measure a patient's memory skills and screen for Dementia. These were developed by Psychiatrists and Psychologists and have been around for quite a while. The tests involve asking the patient a few simple questions and if the patient achieves a low score then the test will be repeated at a later date as things like being unwell or depression can affect one's performance. If the score is again low the GP will refer the patient to a Consultant Psychiatrist for a full assessment. There has been some criticism of these tests as some of the questions rely more on knowledge than just memory; you cannot be expected to remember something you never knew! However they do indicate if there is a need to investigate further or whether the memory loss is just part of the normal ageing process.

Many people notice that they can remember something that happened ages ago but not what they did that morning. This is normal and happens because different parts of the brain deal with different things. The ability of the brain to remember and process information can be impaired by a number of causes:

- Stroke
- Heart disease
- Under- or over-active thyroid
- Trauma to the head
- Depression
- Infection
- Medication
- Drugs
- Alcohol
- Lack of oestrogen in women or testosterone in men

What is Alzheimer's Disease?

Dementia, however, is more than simple loss of memory and has different forms but 60% of cases are the result of Alzheimer's disease. When the disease was first described by Dr Alzheimer in 1906 he had arrived at his conclusions through studying the clinical notes and dissecting the brain of a 51 year old lady who had been a resident in a lunatic asylum. Her abilities had deteriorated over a 5-6 year period and by studying her brain he noticed that certain physical changes had occurred. Today diagnosis is much more patient-friendly as these changes in the brain can be seen through MRI.



Alzheimer noted that amyloid plaques had built up between nerve cells (neurons) in the lady's brain. Amyloid is a general term for protein fragments that the body produces normally. Beta amyloid is a protein fragment snipped from an amyloid precursor protein (APP).

In a healthy brain, these protein fragments are broken down and eliminated. In Alzheimer's disease, the fragments accumulate to form hard, insoluble plaques. Alzheimer also noted that there were changes to the twisted fibres in the brain called neurofibrillary tangles. These tangles consist primarily of a protein called tau, which forms part of a structure called a microtubule. The microtubule helps transport nutrients and other important substances from one part of the nerve cell to another.

In Alzheimer's disease, however, the tau protein is abnormal and the microtubule structures collapse. Today, as well as an MRI, blood tests are carried out to rule out other causes of unusual brain scans such as infection or hormonal imbalance.

What is the Treatment?

There are basically two forms of treatment although neither is a cure for the disease:

Medical

- There are a number of drugs that can help relieve the symptoms and slow down the process but they cannot reverse the deterioration in the brain. The 3 main ones are Aricept, Galantamine and Memantine.

Non-Medical

- There are several practical things a patient can do to help themselves handle day-to-day activities:
 - make lists of what you have to do, buy etc
 - break tasks up into small chunks
 - develop a routine and stick to it
 - read the newspaper regularly to keep track of events
 - keep a diary
 - use sticky notes to remind you of things to do
 - keep keys etc in the same place
 - set up Direct Debits for paying bills etc
 - keep important numbers near the telephone
 - take your time over things
 - take plenty of exercise
 - reduce your alcohol consumption
 - ask for help

Where Can I Get Further Information and Support?

There are several places where you can find information, help and advice on Alzheimer's disease for example:

- www.alzheimers.org.uk
- www.dementiaweboxfordshire.org.uk .This is a new service which anyone can access without being referred by a GP and covers a whole range of topics from diagnosis to financial support.

Summary

All of us will find that our memory deteriorates with age which is not, incidentally, due to information overload. There are things we can do to keep our brains healthy which include:

- Keeping the brain active and challenged through board games, crossword puzzles, Sudoku, playing a musical instrument, learning another language etc.
- Eating healthily
- Keeping physically active
- Watching your weight
- Engaging in social activities
- Keeping alcohol consumption to a moderate level
- Protecting your head from injury

In an article about memory loss, one of the most important things to remember is that if you, a friend or family member think there may be a problem, don't leave it and worry – **ASK FOR HELP!**