

Alzheimer's

ORANGE COUNTY

The Impact of Alzheimer's Disease on Orange County

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According to the National Institute of Health, more than 5.5 million Americans, mostly over 65, have dementia caused by Alzheimer's disease. In Orange County, over 84,000 people are impacted by Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's is the sixth leading cause of death nationally. The age of our population coupled with higher concentrations of multi-cultural populations that are at greater risk make Alzheimer's disease the third leading cause of death in Orange County.

Dementia is the overarching term used to describe a neurologically impairing condition that impacts a person's daily life. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, followed by vascular dementia.

While the cause of the disease remains a mystery, science has uncovered some of the key physiological factors that exist. A protein chain called Amyloid Beta breaks off at the wrong spot, causing it to adhere to the brain and cause damage. Also, tangled bundles of fibers, or tau tangles are present. Inflammation may also have a great impact. Even though we know these things exist, science has yet to prove if one or more of them causes the disease or if the cause lies elsewhere.



Memory loss is not a natural part of aging. We lose a certain amount of plasticity as we age, but major changes in memory can be a sign of something that needs attention. Since up to 15% of memory impairments can be treated, made better or even cured (medication conflicts, depression, etc.), it is important to seek a competent clinician with experience in memory loss if you notice changes in your memory.

The medications often prescribed in Alzheimer's disease seem to work best when given earlier in the disease process, so early diagnosis is helpful. They are believed to have some impact on symptoms, but do not change the pathology of the disease. Another related condition, Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) is also frequently seen in older populations. While it may or may not lead to Alzheimer's or another dementia, it is important to know your status so you can take proactive steps to maintain your brain health.

There are more white papers released on research into dementia than any other disease condition. Despite hundreds of clinical trials, many with sites in Orange County, we do not have a cure. We do know that diet, in particular a Mediterranean diet, exercise and social stimulation are the best actions to take to both prevent the disease or slow its progression. We have world class research sites such as UCI MIND (www.mind.uci.edu) in Orange County, with dozens of clinical trials coordinated by experts in the field for anyone interested in moving the science forward.

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The first step for someone worried about their memory can be a memory screen, conducted by many organization including Alzheimer's Orange County (www.alzoc.org), the Hoag Center for Vital Aging, and many clinical trial providers. The next step, if warranted, is a full diagnosis. The UCI MIND clinic, the UCI HAPS clinic, neuropsychologists and many neurologists can provide diagnostic support.

For someone diagnosed with dementia of any type, accessing supportive services early can be a great help as things progress. Local senior centers, Alzheimer's OC and some banks provide classes on planning for your financial future in the event of a long term illness. Considering early on in the process how you would like things to be handled later can give families comfort knowing that your wishes are honored.

Alzheimer's OC, the Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org) and individual counselors offer support groups, as well as educational programs, recreational programs and social programs for people experiencing dementia and their caregivers.

Later in the dementia process, an adult day health care program, where physical and occupational therapies are offered may be considered. Residential programs exist throughout the county, as well as hospice and end of life planning.

Planning early can save a great deal of heartache later on.

The business community is also impacted by Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. The population of people over 65 is the only growing demographic in Orange County. One in six at age 65 are expected to get Alzheimer's disease and one in three at age 85. Our health care system is unprepared for the massive influx of people experiencing this debilitating illness. Facilities are already experiencing a shortage in qualified caregivers and the cost of care is often out of the patients' reach.

Thousands of seniors experiencing dementia live alone in Orange County. Companies are impacted when adult children, spouses or other caregivers



need time to support their loved ones, and to deal with the stresses of caregiving. Alzheimer's Orange County offers to programs to support businesses as they seek to support their employees. The "Dementia Friends" program is a quick training on how businesses, residents and service providers can become more dementia friendly. It is offered at your site and is free of charge. You may also choose to host a Brown Bag lunch for employees wanting to learn more about Alzheimer's and the resources and support available. Our senior trainers can offer information and referrals, helping working caregivers keep their focus.

Orange County will see the number of people experiencing dementia rise – and rise quickly. If you or someone you know finds themselves impacted by dementia, the most important step you can take is to reach out for assistance. Call 1-844-HELPAZ or visit www.alzoc.org

More information is available at 1-844-HELPAZ or at www.alzoc.org.