

All about Alzheimer's: Free conference coming to Irvine

Column: Take a memory test, learn about the latest science and get tips for finding help on April 19

Jil Wexler and her mom, who was her cornerstone. Her mom has Alzheimer's disease. (Photo courtesy Wexler)

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Her mom was an attorney — a “brilliant, brilliant, bright star.” They used to talk every single day. “She was my cornerstone — she always had the best advice,” said Jil Wexler.

But now, “She’s disappeared.”

Alzheimer’s disease is a slow death, a long goodbye, a soul-crusher as the people we know and love fade before our eyes. It’s one of the leading causes of death in California, and the Alzheimer’s death rate here is among the highest in the nation — eclipsed only by Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Tennessee, Washington and Utah, according to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

As people live longer, the number of folks with Alzheimer’s is expected to grow exponentially — and, disturbingly, more young people are being diagnosed with early-onset dementia and Alzheimer’s, according to a sobering 2020 [study by Blue Cross/Blue Shield](#). Though the numbers were small, diagnoses among insured folks aged 30 to 64 increased 200% over just five years, with women more heavily impacted than men, the study found.

TABLE 1: ESTIMATED NUMBER AND PERCENT CHANGE WITH ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE IN CALIFORNIA COU POPULATION OF 700,000 OR MORE, 2019, 2025, 2040

County	2019	2025	2040	% increase 2019 - 2025
Los Angeles	177345	230167	416531	30%
Orange	59339	76730	131906	29%
San Diego	58616	76204	133257	30%
Riverside	44694	59020	108287	32%
Santa Clara	35314	46342	82336	31%
San Bernardino	28925	38387	69614	33%
Alameda	28045	37791	69264	35%
Sacramento	24885	32569	56525	31%
Contra Costa	21857	29557	54073	35%
San Francisco	18749	23222	37153	24%
San Mateo	16289	20924	34612	28%
Ventura	15807	20627	36445	30%
Fresno	14643	18641	31085	27%
Kern	11487	14545	23793	27%
San Joaquin	10999	14601	26484	33%

Source: State of California, Department of Finance, *E-1 Population Estimates / the State with Annual Percent Change — January 1, 2019 and 2020*. Sacrame

Luckily — for those of us who are not getting any younger — Southern California is a [hotbed of Alzheimer's research](#), and the Alzheimer’s Foundation of America is hosting a free Educational Conference for Southern California from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Wednesday, April 19 at Hilton Irvine, 18800 MacArthur Blvd.

Folks can learn about the latest science from experts at UC Irvine, how to mobilize local support for the sometimes-overwhelming job of caregiving from folks at Alzheimer’s Orange County, explore how young folks can get involved and get tips on keeping the brain in tip-top shape. Advance registration is highly recommended at [www.alzfdn.org/tour](#).

Over the next 20 years, the impact of Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias on the state of California will increase dramatically, said a [recent study](#) from the California Department of Public Health.

Learn, connect

Sessions will include “Looking Forward to a Future Without Alzheimer’s,” where Frank M. LaFerla, director of the UCI Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center at the university’s [Institute for Memory Impairments and Neurological Disorders](#), will talk about the latest research underway. [UCI was recently awarded a \\$47 million grant](#) from the National Institute on Aging to develop next-generation mouse models for studying late-onset Alzheimer’s, and Hoag Hospital is the site of [clinical trials](#) that hope to uncover treatment and even cures.





Alzheimer's is a leading cause of death in California and the U.S. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)

There's also "It Takes a Village," where Jim McAleer, president and CEO of [Alzheimer's Orange County](#), will walk people through how to access support groups, educational workshops, adult daycare facilities and the like. The group has two adult day centers — Healthy Aging Center Acacia and Healthy Aging Center Laguna Woods — and he'll stress the importance of engaging with the community.

In "Youth, Care, and Alzheimer's," Giovanna Manson-Hing, a public health gerontologist, will explore the role younger folks play in caring for people with Alzheimer's, and what they can do now to mitigate their own risks.

Free, confidential memory screenings will be conducted throughout the day as well.

From the front lines

Dee Ransom has been married to her husband John for 51 years. He was an FBI agent, diagnosed in 2017 after having trouble communicating and understanding. They started taking classes together at Alzheimer's Orange County, and she cared for him at their Huntington Beach home "happily and wonderfully" as long as she could.

But the disease progressed. He passed one night. "I could no longer keep him safe," the former school administrator said. She sold their home to keep him in a quality





(Illustration by thinkstock.com)

Her advice to others is to “connect, connect, connect” through the Alzheimer’s groups. Events are not just informative, but social. “We built a community,” she said. “The caregiver needs to take care of him or herself as well as the person they’re tending. It can be exhausting. You’re not alone. Just ask.”

Meantime, Wexler’s mom is being heroically cared for at home by her stepdad. “It has been heartbreaking to watch the brilliant woman who raised me become a shell of herself,” she said. “Luckily, she is still a kind, caring and loving person. Some of her antics are funny, but most are sad. At times she does not recognize her husband, my dear step-father Paul, and asks him how long they have been married. It has been well over 40 years.”

Wexler will be teaching a group Pilates class at Club Pilates in Newport Beach in June to benefit the Alzheimer’s Foundation. Details to come.

“Knowledge is a useful and powerful tool that can help make any situation easier to navigate, especially something as challenging as caring for a loved one with Alzheimer’s disease,” said Charles J. Fuschillo, Jr., AFA president and CEO, in a prepared statement. “Connecting families with useful, practical information and support that can help them now and be better prepared for the future is what this conference is all about.”

Questions about Alzheimer’s? AFA’s helpline is 866-232-8484, or web chat at www.alzfdn.org. Alzheimer’s Orange County’s helpline is 844-373-4400, or check out www.alzoc.org.

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Teri Sforza is one of the lead reporters on the OCR/SCNG probe of fraud, abuse and death in the Southern California addiction treatment industry. Our “Rehab Riviera” coverage won first place for investigative reporting from the California Newspaper Publishers Association, first place for projects reporting from Best of the West and is a finalist for the National Institute for Health Care Management Foundation’s print award, competing with the New York Times, the Washington Post and ProPublica. Sforza birthed the Watchdog column for The Orange County Register in 2008, aiming to keep a critical (but good-humored) eye on governments and nonprofits, large and small. It won first place for public service reporting from the California Newspaper Publishers Association in 2010. She also contributed to the OCR’s Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation of fertility fraud at UC Irvine, covered what was then the largest municipal bankruptcy in America’s history, and is the author of “The Strangest Song,” the first book to tell the story of a genetic condition called Williams syndrome and the extraordinary musicality of many of the people who have it. She earned her M.F.A. from UCLA’s School of Theater, Film and Television, and enjoys making documentaries, including the OCR’s first: “The Boy Monk,” a story that was also told as a series in print. Watchdogs need help: Point us to documents that can help tell stories that need to be told, and we’ll do the rest. Send tips to watchdog@ocregister.com.

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