“What can I do to prevent Alzheimer’s?” This is one of the most frequently asked questions of our Alzheimer’s Association care specialist team.

Alzheimer’s is one of the most feared diseases today. Scientists have not yet identified its causes or a cure. Doctors don’t even have available a conclusive test to diagnose it. Over 5.4 million Americans are living with it, and the numbers are expected to rise.

Epidemiology studies have shown that there is no 100 percent sure way to avoid getting Alzheimer’s disease. Yet, if there is one thing everyone can do today to reduce their risk of Alzheimer’s, the answer is clear: exercise.

Physical activity before developing cognitive symptoms

Mounting evidence shows regular exercise helps reduce levels of brain loss and helps our cognitive abilities as we age.

A Florida study demonstrated that exercise at midlife may reduce the odds of dementia in older adults by up to 60 percent. Such extraordinary findings were corroborated by several other studies, including a University of Lisbon study that found that physical activity benefits happen independently of age, education, vascular history or diabetes.

“Basically, whatever’s good for your heart is good for your head,” says Dr. Lawrence Whalley, a researcher at Scotland’s University of Aberdeen.

“Mortality of vascular disease in the United States was halved between 1965 and 1995, and this is one of the great public-health successes of the 20th century. And what people are looking for in dementia prevention is the same because the factors that everyone knows predispose to heart disease also predispose to dementia.”

In addition to reducing risk for dementia, regular exercise has also been found to help stave off the onset of Alzheimer’s and dementia, another reason for all age groups to exercise.

Physical activity at early stages of Alzheimer’s or MCI

For those affected with MCI (Mild Cognitive Impairment) or the early stages of Alzheimer’s, regular exercise should be a priority.

In a six-year study with 1,740 participants in Seattle, researchers found that those with early Alzheimer’s disease who were less physically fit had four times more brain shrinkage than those who were more physically fit. The findings suggest physical fitness helps slow the progression of the disease.

Nothing else so far has demonstrated such dramatic, positive impact in the fight against the onset of dementia. Currently available dementia and Alzheimer medications can alleviate some of the symptoms, but they do not slow the progression of the disease. Including regular exercise in your personal strategy against dementia will help you preserve your cognitive skills in addition to enhancing your fitness levels.

Physical activity at mid-stages of Alzheimer’s

Professionals working in dementia care have long observed that exercising at the mid-stages of Alzheimer’s disease helps patients maintain independent living skills, maintain muscle memory, reduce fall risk and promote balance and mobility. Exercise also helps reduce stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia – problems that often affect people in the mid-stages of Alzheimer’s.

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Caregiver Tips

- Use protective headgear when engaged in physical activities, such as bicycling, horseback riding, skating and so on.
- Aerobic exercise improves oxygen consumption, which benefits brain function; aerobic fitness has been found to reduce brain cell loss in elderly subjects.
- Physical activities that involve mental engagement such as plotting a route, observing traffic signals and making choices, can add value to your brain-health workout - particularly if you do these activities with a companion!
- Walking, bicycling, gardening, tai chi, yoga and other activities of about 30 minutes daily get the body moving and the heart pumping.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has created a strengthening program that can be accessed on-line at cdc.gov/physicalactivity/growingstronger
- If you or your loved one has memory loss and enjoys taking walks, wearing a Safe Return ID bracelet can bring peace of mind. Call (888) 572-8566 or visit medicalert.org/safereturn to enroll.

Can playing golf help your brain?
Golf can be even more stimulating when played without a cart. It involves physical exercise (walking as well as swinging), mental stimulation (strategizing and keeping score), and social contact.

References:

Resources:
- The Visiting Nurses and Hospice Care Association has physical therapists with plenty of experience in dementia care. Call (805) 965-5555 for more information.
- Vista Del Monte has a great fitness and aquatic program for all seniors. Call (805) 879-5559 or visit sbseniorfit.org for details.
- Live 2B Healthy Senior Fitness provides fitness classes in many local senior residences, and now they also provide individual, in-home training. Call Chandra at (805) 665-3189 or visit live2bhealthy.com for details.
- Most senior community centers provide fitness program that may include yoga, dancing and tai chi. Please contact the center closer to your home for schedules.