

Monthly newsletter
for people caring for
those affected by
Alzheimer's disease
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Highlights from the 2022 Alzheimer's Association International Conference®

By Luciana Mitzkun

Scientists, researchers, clinicians, and care practitioners from all over the world converged into San Diego this August for the Alzheimer's Association International Conference. Over 5,000 dementia professionals attended the week-long conference with over 500 podium and 150 oral presentations, plus 9 plenary sessions and nearly 3,000 posters to view. Most of the information was being presented for the very first time.



The excitement in the air was palpable—researchers were eager to share their findings and connect with other professionals and scholars. The event provided unparalleled networking opportunities to support collaborations and the exchange of ideas. As a dementia care professional, my main interest was learning how new research can help the families I serve in Santa Barbara County. Here, I will classify the trove of information presented into four basic areas: prevention, diagnosis, treatment and symptom management.

Prevention — All data points to the wisdom of reducing your risk!

There were plenty of new findings confirming the benefits of prevention strategies in delaying the onset of the disease, slowing the development of symptoms, and mitigating their severity.

The bulk of the research focused on vascular strengthening strategies, and the consensus is on exercise!

We have known that physical exercise has

the potential to slow down the progression of the disease for quite some time, but researchers are also demonstrating reduction in the presence of the proteins β -amyloid and Tau (which are associated with Alzheimer's disease) in the brains of those who exercise ([Carmichael, et al.](#)). A team from Vancouver, Canada ([Noseworthy, et al.](#)) found that exercising outdoors has even greater wellness and cognitive benefits!

Researchers are also focusing on building cognitive reserves, as in strengthening the brain itself. One study from the University of Indiana ([Manchella, et al.](#)) found that social bridging—defined as networking with persons of different social groups, races, or religions—creates resilience against cognitive decline and increases the size of the brain, particularly in the amygdala and left frontal lobe.

The message is clear: To fortify your brain and reduce your risk of developing Alzheimer's, find some form of physical exercise you enjoy doing, give preference to outdoor activities, and do it with friends or others in the community.

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Santa Barbara County
1528 Chapala St. Suite 204
Santa Barbara 93101
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San Luis Obispo County
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San Luis Obispo 93401
805.342.0956

Ventura County
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Ventura 93003
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Diagnosis — Tests are now available!

A test that measures β -amyloid was approved by the FDA this May. Fujirebio, the makers of [Lumipulse™](#), were present at the conference and expressed the hope that the test, which uses spinal fluid, will soon become standard in diagnosing Alzheimer's disease.

Although the development of these tests is a great step forward in doctors' ability to provide patients with a reliable diagnosis, it is unlikely that any single test will be conclusive on its own.

Any test must be used in conjunction with other biomarkers for a complete diagnosis, and the research community is still studying what their results imply in terms of prognosis for the progression of the disease. More than 400 studies were presented on this topic alone.

Treatment — New focus on sleep and inflammation

While β -amyloid and tau continue to be the top targets for those studying treatment options, researchers are also looking at brain inflammation and its relationship with brain processes that happen during sleep.

During sleep, brain cells decrease in size. This allows the brain fluid encompassing these cells to flow more freely and carry away debris created by normal brain operations and broken-down particles of proteins --- including β -amyloid. Brain waste that is not properly "washed away" during sleep may clump and clutter, interfering with normal brain function. This brain-cleansing system is called the glymphatic system and appears to malfunction in patients with Alzheimer's disease.

The [AlfaSleep project](#) in Barcelona, Spain, is studying how sleep deprivation and neuroinflammation may play a role in cognitive impairment. An Australian study is looking at the extent to which inflammation is related to disease progression in patients before and after symptoms of dementia are present, and how inflammation levels can also be a biomarker for the disease ([Cherbuin, et al.](#)).

While a cure for Alzheimer's still eludes the scientific community, researchers are leaving no stone unturned.

Symptom Management — Guidelines for treating dementia-related agitation

In the U.S., there are currently no medications approved to treat agitation in dementia patients. Some doctors will prescribe medications off-label to treat dementia-related agitation, but many clinicians are uncomfortable prescribing medications for uses that are not specifically approved by the FDA. Family members are also often wary of side effects. These concerns are reasonable, but it can leave patients in a state of agitation and despair without the relief of pharmaceuticals. Caring for patients suffering from the behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia (BPSD) is extremely difficult and is driving up the costs of hospitalizations and residential care for dementia patients.

In a workshop addressing this lapse in treatment guidance, [Dr. Jeff Cummings](#) from the International Geriatrics Association presented a most valuable pharmacological algorithm, in which doctors will find guidelines in the use of pharmaceuticals while utilizing their own judgment and experience in determining which course of therapy is the most appropriate for a patient. These treatments are not to be used in place of psychosocial interventions; rather, they are to be used in addition to non-pharmacological strategies, including the use of nature, socialization, music, arts, and sounds.

Looking at the problem from yet another angle, a study in Zurich has found that high concentrations of the stress hormone *cortisol* (found in the cerebrospinal fluid of dementia patients) are associated with the severity of neuropsychiatric symptoms and their persistence or worsening over time ([Popp, et al.](#)). This in itself can open a new avenue of treatment and prevention for these symptoms.

The Alzheimer's Association has once again done an amazing job in bringing together so many brilliant minds invested in decoding the mystery behind this disease, and we are much closer to the solutions for these efforts. The next AAIC will be held in Amsterdam and online from July 16 – 20, 2023.

Luciana Mitzkun is a Memory Care Specialist, author of Ahead of Dementia, Un Paso Adelante de la Demencia, and Ahead of Memory Loss. She is the Community Services Director at Villa Alamar Memory Care in Santa Barbara, and volunteers for our Chapter.

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