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Neurology

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Easily one of the most complicated and fragile structures in the human body, the nervous system makes it possible for us to experience the world around us. It enables us to do many things we sometimes take for granted—walking, breathing, and blinking, to name just a few.

In order for these and other activities to occur, electrical impulses must travel along the roughly 45 miles of nerves in the body. Messages can either come from the brain—telling your hand to pick up a pen, for example—or travel to it from any of the body's sensitive nerve endings.

These transmissions are made possible through an electrochemical process that takes place in the brain's estimated 100 billion nerve cells (also called neurons). Neurons communicate with each other through approximately 1 quadrillion synapses, using chemicals called neurotransmitters.

While the brain processes and produces information, the spinal cord is responsible for delivering it. This thick bundle of nerves travels down the center of the spine, with tendrils branching out again and again throughout the entire body. The spinal cord, longer in men than in women, is sheltered by the spinal column—a bone tube made up of individual sections called vertebrae.

Though well protected, this system is extremely delicate. Disorders can occur either at birth—as is the case with cerebral palsy—or as a result of trauma to the head or spinal cord. Drugs, alcohol and cigarettes can also interfere with the body's communication system.

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Alzheimer's Disease

Affecting an estimated 4.5 million Americans, Alzheimer's Disease is a terminal illness that destroys cells in the parts of the brain controlling thought, memory and language. It is the most prevalent form of dementia among older people and has a devastating impact on sufferers, whose ability to perform daily tasks diminishes as the disease advances.

Though scientists have yet to unlock the mystery of Alzheimer's, many believe that there are multiple risk factors and that aging may be one of the greatest. In fact, the number of Americans diagnosed with Alzheimer's doubles with every five-year age bracket after 65. Currently, about 10 percent of Americans over age 65 have Alzheimer's Disease. The figure jumps to 50 percent for adults over the age of 85. A family member with the disease increases a person's likelihood of developing Alzheimer's.

As with many diseases of the brain, the duration—which can be as few as three years to as many as 20—and severity of Alzheimer's varies by patient. Eventually, however, the disease progresses to different parts of the brain and ultimately causes death.

If Alzheimer's Disease is suspected in a family member, it is important to meet with a physician to obtain a proper diagnosis. In some cases, behaviors reminiscent of Alzheimer's are actually indicators of other conditions, such as drug interactions, brain tumors, thyroid problems or depression. Importantly, many of these other conditions are treatable and correctable, so evaluation and care of symptoms is vital! While a diagnosis can generally be made with about 90 percent accuracy, there is not a single, comprehensive diagnostic exam for Alzheimer's—instead, doctors use a battery of tests to determine the presence of the disease.

Although Alzheimer's cannot be cured, it can be treated. In recent years, great progress has been made in helping to stave off the onset or worsening of symptoms for people in the early and middle stages of the disease. Treatment can also help ease the symptoms suffered by individuals in the later stages of the illness.

Recognizing the Symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease

It is normal to experience some memory loss as we age, but Alzheimer's goes beyond everyday lapses in recall. The disease affects one's ability to think, learn and communicate—progressing to a point where it interferes with daily life, eventually proving fatal.

As with any progressive disease, early diagnosis is important for determining the correct course of treatment. If any of the following behaviors are recognized, it is important for a physician to exam the individual to confirm or refute the exact causes.

1. Memory loss

Not just misplacing the car keys, the memory lapses are more severe, such as forgetting recently learned information and not being able to remember it later.

2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks

Trouble performing tasks that have become so routine they usually require no thought, such as preparing a meal or tying shoelaces.

3. Problems with language

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Being at a loss for common, everyday words and/or using odd words and phrases in their place. For example, replacing the word "kitchen" with the description "that place where we make meals."

4. Disorientation to time and place

Becoming lost or disoriented in familiar settings, forgetting where one lives or being unaware of one's surroundings.

5. Poor or decreased judgment

Making unusual judgment calls, such as wearing shorts in freezing weather or spending money on unnecessary items or services.

6. Problems with abstract thinking

Difficulty grasping anything that isn't concrete, such as struggling to balance a checkbook because the concept of numbers and calculations are foreign.

7. Misplacing things

Beyond simply losing items, a symptom of Alzheimer's would be placing things in completely inappropriate places—such as putting the plates in the closet.

8. Changes in mood or behavior

Extreme, rapid mood swings with no provocation.

9. Changes in personality

Significant changes in basic personality or taking relationships with family members to the extreme.

10. Loss of initiative

A general disinterest in everyday chores or activities; or excessive sleeping.

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Spinal Cord Injuries

The spinal column is a bundle of nerves starting at the base of the brain, running through the bony protection of the spinal column, ending around the waist on most people. These nerves relay messages to and from the brain, carrying the electrical impulses required for the function and sensation of every body part and organ.

Any damage to the spinal cord resulting in loss of mobility or feeling is referred to as a spinal cord injury (SCI). This damage can be present at birth, in the form of diseases such as spina bifida, or a result of trauma to the brain or spine. In America, the leading traumatic causes are car accidents, acts of violence and falls. Currently there is no cure for spinal cord injuries.

It is estimated that over 11,000 Americans suffer spinal cord injuries each year, with approximately 400,000 people currently living with the effects of their injuries. The majority (approximately 60 percent) of these individuals are males between the ages of 16 and 30 years.

Every spinal cord injury is categorized as either **complete** or **incomplete**. A complete injury is one in which everything below the point of injury is lost: function, sensation and voluntary movement. Incomplete injuries leave some function below the point of injury; for instance, one side will still experience sensations, while the other doesn't.

It is also not uncommon for a spinal cord injury to cause secondary difficulties. In addition to loss of motor function and sensation, it can affect bowel and bladder function, as well as breathing and blood pressure regulation, depending on the location of the injury.

Not every instance of SCI is preventable, but in many cases an ounce of prevention is truly worth a pound of cure.

- Follow safety procedures in sporting events and workplace environments.
- Lift heavy objects properly (with the legs, letting muscles do the majority of the work).
- Before diving into unfamiliar water, learn its depth and locate any obstructions.
- Wear helmets when on scooters, bicycles, roller blades, motorcycles and skate boards.
- Drive defensively and always wear seatbelts. Never drive after consuming alcohol or any drug (including prescription medication) that may affect ability.

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Stroke

A stroke occurs when the flow of blood to an area of the brain is interrupted, killing the brain cells in that region of the brain. Damage can take place within minutes after the stroke begins. The extent of function and sensation loss varies based on the location and size of the stroke.

Though strokes occur in several forms, more than 80 percent are ischemic. These strokes result from an obstruction—usually a blood clot—preventing blood from getting to the brain. Hemorrhagic strokes, which include aneurysms, are a result of a weakened blood vessel bursting. Though hemorrhagic strokes account for only about 17 percent of incidents, their mortality rate is considerably higher.

Regardless of the type of stroke, it is imperative that the sufferer receive prompt medical attention to help prevent damage to additional brain cells. Unfortunately proper care is often delayed because stroke symptoms are not well known. Symptoms include the sudden onset of numbness or weakness of a part of the body, particularly if only affecting one side, sudden confusion, trouble speaking, seeing or walking, dizziness or loss of balance. An instant severe headache could also be a symptom. **If any of these signs are observed, obtain emergency medical care immediately.**

It is equally important to note that most strokes are preventable. Because they can happen to anyone at anytime, it is good to keep the risk factors in mind and manage them as necessary. They include high blood pressure, smoking, excessive alcohol consumption and high cholesterol.

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