

Expert: 1 in 10 over 65 have Alzheimer's

Those at risk for Alzheimer's can take steps to prevent or delay onset

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1-7-10
As the population ages, more and more the problem of Alzheimer's disease becomes a bigger concern. The baby boom of the 1940s to the 1960s led to increasing life expectancy and points to a growing segment of the population at risk for the disease.

"Alzheimer's is a dreaded disease," Dr. Kenneth Kosik at the well-attended Santa Barbara Channel City luncheon Wednesday, held at Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort. As executive director of the Center for Cognitive Fitness & Innovative Therapies, as well as co-director of the Neuroscience Research Institute at UCSB, Dr. Kosik's job has been to address issues of mental decline and promote methods of prevention. "It's a disease that really creates a burden," said Dr. Kosik. "And justifiably so. Because it's a debilitating disease without a cure, and because of the long-term care needs associated with Alzheimer's is a condition that affects not only the sufferer, but also their family.

In addition to that the current health care system, which Dr. Kosik characterizes as inadequate for the treatment of Alzheimer's patients, and American society has have an "oncoming wave" with which it is ill-equipped to deal.

"I don't think the medical community has really stepped up to the plate on this problem," he commented.



Dr. Kenneth Kosik

Physicians may be unable to deal with the complex issues that come with Alzheimer's diagnoses, and because it is a nonsurgical condition which a medical procedure can't cure, hospitals tend to deprioritize the diagnosis and treatment of patients with the ailment. For their part, pharmaceutical companies consider an Alzheimer's diagnosis a condition that's too far gone to treat, said Dr. Kosik.

The statistics are staggering as well. According to Dr. Kosik, by age 65, one in 10 adults have Alzheimer's, and by age 85 fully 50 percent of adults are expected to have the disease.

But while Alzheimer's is a disease whose biggest determining factor is age, it's not to say that it's an inevitable diagnosis. There are some people with a genetic predilection toward the disease, but even with a delayed onset by five years, said Dr. Kosik, there could be a 50 percent reduction in the incidence of Alzheimer's Disease in the United States.

In the meantime, the way to prevent or delay Alzheimer's is squarely in the hands of the people at risk for it, according to Dr. Kosik.



MIKE ELIASON / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

A substantial crowd turned out at Fess Parker's Doubletree resort on Wednesday for an address by Alzheimer's expert Dr. Kenneth Kosik.

"Know your numbers," cautioned Dr. Kosik. Even a systolic number of 140, if experienced often enough, is enough of a risk factor.

"We have to act on the problem today," he said.

Luckily, the factors that contribute to the likelihood of coming down with the disease are not ones that are entirely new. "Inconvertible" data points to influence of cardiovascular risk factors on the likelihood of getting Alzheimer's. Hypertension and high cholesterol are major contributors.

"Know your numbers," cautioned Dr. Kosik. Even a systolic number of 140, if experienced often enough, is enough of a risk factor. Blood pressure, exercise and nutrition are other factors that contribute to the incidence of Alzheimer's. A diet high in vegetables and antioxidant foods will help keep the Alzheimer's away, while high-fat foods will increase the likelihood of cardiovascular issues that may bring on the disease.

Other lifestyle factors Dr. Kosik outlined in his talk included stress (keep it low) and mental activity (keep it high).

By mental activity, it's not the habitual — like the crossword every day — he said, but activities that engage the mind, like learning a new

skill or language, or planning out an event.

Social interaction is also essential. "Having friends is protective," said Dr. Kosik. The irony, he mentioned, is that as people grow older they lose their social circle through deaths and illness.

"The problem is not that we don't know this stuff. It's that we don't do this stuff," he said.

Part of the problem may be the one-size-fits-all approach to managing risk factors for Alzheimer's, according to Dr. Kosik. Those at risk need to be more aware and proactive. Potential care providers need to focus on the aspects of Alzheimer's prevention and detection specific to their patients.

"It's critical that we stare this thing in the eye," he said.

For more information on Alzheimer's Disease, visit nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/Publications/adfact.htm.

For more information on local emerging diagnosis and preventions of Alzheimer's Disease, visit sbcbfit.org.

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