

YOUR GOOD HEALTH ALZHEIMER'S AHEAD

Early diagnosis beneficial for people with dementia

By Encarnacion Pyle

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At first, Chuck Brockman started misplacing his keys and wallet. It must be signs of getting older, Brockman thought. He was 56 at the time, which, "while not old, wasn't young, either," he told himself.

He then kept forgetting to punch in and out of work and couldn't remember how to add or the combination to his locker.

His doctor told him he was stressed and overworked and should try relaxing more.

But once he started having hallucinations and vivid dreams, including one in which an angel told him the date of his not-so-distant death, Brockman knew he was dealing with something much more serious.

So he went back to his doctor, who diagnosed Alzheimer's disease, the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States.

A specialist later confirmed that Brockman had early-onset Lewy body dementia, a neurodegenerative disorder often confused with other disorders because of similar symptoms. People with Lewy body, for example, can experience confusion or memory loss like Alzheimer's, or stiffness, tremors and trouble with gait like Parkinson's.

Though initially reluctant to accept the diagnosis, he now is thankful for the early detection and the opportunity it has given him and his wife, Mindy, to plan for what's to come.

"I've accepted it," said Brockman, now 61, who attends as many support groups as he can to help himself and others. "I figured the good Lord gave it to me for a reason, and maybe it's to be an advocate. I'm at peace with that."

In one study, nearly 1 in 9 people age 45 or older reported increased confu-

sion or memory loss over the previous 12 months, according to data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But fewer than half talked to their doctors about their concerns, despite the benefits of early detection.

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Americans said they feared developing Alzheimer's disease more than any other major, life-threatening disease including cancer, stroke, heart disease or diabetes, according to another survey. Because there's no cure, prevention or treatment to slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease, many see getting it as a death sentence, McGrail said.

Nationally, an estimated 5.4 million Americans are living with the disease at an annual cost to taxpayers of \$236 billion, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

While some might have mild cognitive impairment or be in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia, experiencing increasing or worsening confusion or memory problems — "subjective cognitive decline," as it is called — is just a warning sign, he said.

Early and accurate detection allows whatever is causing the problem — whether it's dementia-related or something else entirely — to be tar-

geted before severe deterioration occurs, said Tricia Bingham, director of programs and services for the central Ohio Alzheimer's Association chapter.

"People don't realize it, but research has shown that 9 percent of individuals experiencing dementia-like symptoms actually have a potentially reversible cause such as depression or a vitamin B12 deficiency," she said.

An early diagnosis, even if for Alzheimer's or another form of dementia, also allows individuals and their families to get treatment to help with symptoms, build a care team, enroll in support services and participate in clinical trials, she said.

Affected individuals can be involved in important decisions about their care and finances while they still have the capacity to make them, she said.

Despite hating that he had to stop driving and working, Brockman said he still feels like his old self and now focuses on what he can do, instead of what he can't. He and his wife enjoy the education, encouragement and support they receive at the various support groups they attend.

They joined family and friends in participating in last year's Columbus Walk to End Alzheimer's, raising \$900 for Alzheimer's care, support and research.

Brockman, who recently was asked by the national Alzheimer's Association to serve as a Lewy body dementia advocate, also was approved to participate in a drug trial through Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center. And he and his wife are doing things they've always dreamed of, such as attending a Florida State-Clemson game in Tallahassee last fall. No more putting things off, they agreed.

"We're not going to let it stand in our way," Mrs. Brockman said.

"I'm focused on living in a way I wasn't before my diagnosis," Mr. Brockman added.

If you have questions or concerns about memory loss generally or Alzheimer's and other dementias specifically, call the Alzheimer's Association 24-7 Helpline at 1-800-272-3900, or go to www.alz.org.

— Encarnacion Pyle writes for *The Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*. She can be reached at epyle@dispatch.com.



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