Exploring the Link Between Depression and Early Alzheimer’s

Prozac. Zoloft. Paxil. Effexor. Cymbalta. In today’s day and age, I can guarantee you recognize at least one or more of those medications. What do they all have in common you? They are all antidepressants. It is completely understandable for patients with Alzheimer’s disease to become depressed. But evidence suggests that depression, no matter how early you experience it, may increase the risk for developing Alzheimer’s. Scary? I’d say so.

Two new studies have increased our knowledge on the link between depression and early Alzheimer’s. The first study proposes that depression when occurred before the age of 60 increases the risk for Alzheimer’s. If you have a loved one with Alzheimer’s there are memory care facilities that will be there to help you in this time of need. Think about it, as of right now, some young adults even take antidepressants. Could this increase their chances? However, change in the brain regions related to memory did not appear to play a role. The second study also showed that Alzheimer’s is an effect of depression, but that symptoms of depressive behavior do not intensify in the years immediately before a diagnosis is made, making the connection difficult to trace.

Researchers have mixed ideas about the two combined. Alzheimer’s could be a long process that begins many years before memory loss even occurs. The scary part is that it is possible that depression is some way proven to be “toxic” to the brain cells. It is extremely important to understand the connection between depression and Alzheimer’s, as more than five million American’s are affected by Alzheimer’s. When millions more, both young and old are affected by depression. In conclusion, researchers guess that about half of the people with Alzheimer’s also suffer from depression, which unlike Alzheimer’s is a treatable disease.

Brain Changes

The study that took place in the medical journal Neurology, showed that people who suffered from depression are more likely to develop Alzheimer’s than others who were never affected by depressive behavior. The age range of the study was between the ages of 60 and 90 and involved 486 people, out of the study none were affected with dementia. Of the whole, 134 people had experienced an episode of depression, causing them to seek medical advice. For six years the people included in the study were followed, when during that time 33 people developed Alzheimer’s disease. People who experienced depression were 2.5 times more likely to develop Alzheimer’s disease than people who had never had depression. On top of that, the risk was even higher for people who experienced depression before the age of 60; they were nearly four times more likely to develop Alzheimer’s than those with no depression at all. “We don’t know yet whether depression contributes to the development of Alzheimer’s disease or whether another unknown factor causes both depression and dementia,” said study author Dr. Monique M.B. Breteler, M.D., Ph.D., with the Erasmus University Medical Center in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. “We’ll need to do more studies to understand the relationship between depression and dementia.” One theory is high stress hormones can lead to the loss of cells in two areas of the brain, the hippocampus and the amygdala, which are crucial for memory and emotions, the two are affected which then contributes to Alzheimer’s. But this study found no difference in the size of the two brain areas between people with depression and people who never experienced it in their lifetime. “The Dutch study also assessed whether the participants had symptoms of depression at the start of the study. But those with depressive symptoms at the start of the study were not more likely to develop Alzheimer’s than those with no depression at the start of the
study.” Fortunately, even though Alzheimer’s is not curable at this time there are many ways of dealing with your loved one’s illness. There are senior living and memory care facilities where people assist your loved one, along with.

**Worsening Depression?**

Published in the Archives of General Psychiatry, the second study found that symptoms of depression did not intensify in the years headed to a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease. The results imply that depression is not a consequence of developing Alzheimer’s disease.

Another study was taken place at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, where they studied 917 older Catholic nuns, monks, and priests. Beginning in the year 1994 none included in the study were experiencing any memory problems. The participants had yearly clinical evaluations and also completed a 10-item scale assessing their symptoms of depression. In the end the people included in the study who developed Alzheimer’s disease showed no increase in depressive symptoms.
