Research Advances at the 2024 Alzheimer's Association International Conference

With nearly 7 million Americans living with Alzheimer's disease today, including 426,500 New Yorkers, researchers are working tirelessly to advance science that will lead to earlier detection, preventions and additional new treatments for Alzheimer's and all dementia.

At the end of July, more than 13,000 researchers attended the Alzheimer's Association International Conference® (AAIC®) 2024 both in person in Philadelphia, and virtually to share the latest in Alzheimer's and dementia science. Highlights include:

Blood Tests May Revolutionize Accuracy of Alzheimer's Disease Diagnosis

Blood tests for Alzheimer's disease are moving closer to use in physicians' offices. A blood test was more than 90% accurate in identifying Alzheimer's in patients with cognitive symptoms at primary care and specialized memory care clinics. Blood tests that assess phosphorylated tau (p-tau) protein to identify Alzheimer's-related changes in the brain show the most promise. Once they are confirmed, blood tests could (a) improve the accuracy of, and access to, diagnosis in primary care and specialist centers, (b) enhance recruitment for Alzheimer's clinical trials and (c) slash wait times for Alzheimer's disease assessment and treatment.

Wildfire Smoke Riskier for Brain than Other Types of Air Pollution

Researchers have determined that the risk of dementia is notably stronger from wildfire smoke than from other sources of fine particulate matter air pollution, such as motor vehicles and factories. A large, long-term study — including more than 1.2 million people over 10 years — suggests that long-term exposure to wildfire smoke may be particularly dangerous to brain health, raising the risk of being diagnosed with dementia. Last summer, our area was impacted by Canadian wildfires – hazy skies, the lingering smell of a campfire, and air quality alerts. There is a strong likelihood this could occur again, so this study is important to note.

GLP-1 Drug May Protect the Brian

Liraglutide, a glucagon-like peptide drug (GLP-1) appears to protect the brain from shrinkage and slow cognitive decline. Phase 2b results suggest the drug, which is similar to the popular diabetes drugs Ozempic and Wegovy, may slow cognitive decline by as much as 18% in one year and reduce shrinkage in the parts of the brain that control memory, learning, language and decision making by nearly 50% compared to a placebo, prompting the lead researcher to note that it could protect the brain, much like statins protect the heart.

Processed Red Meat May Raise Risk of Dementia; Swapping it for Nuts or Beans May Lower It

People who eat about two servings per week of processed red meat have an increased risk of dementia. Researchers say eating at least 1/4 serving of processed red meat per day, such as bacon, hotdogs and sausages, increases the risk of dementia by 14%, compared to eating 1/10 of a serving a day (about three servings a month). Research also found that replacing one serving of processed red meat every day with one serving of nuts and legumes can lower the risk of dementia by about 20%.

"Meetings like this one are a tremendous source of hope for the future – a future that isn't too far away," said Erica Salamida, Director of Community Outreach for the New York State Coalition of Alzheimer's Association Chapters, who attended this year's conference. "Over the next decade, we expect the Alzheimer's and dementia landscape to continue to evolve at a rapid pace, which will allow people across all communities to take action to promote brain health, reduce risk and prevent dementia."

The Alzheimer's Association is available with information and support for families as they navigate the disease and related research. For more information, visit alz.org or call the 24/7 Helpline at 800.272.3900. ■

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