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Behavioral Treatments for Alzheimer's Disease

(COLUMBUS, Ohio)—Alzheimer's disease is a progressive brain disorder that gradually destroys a person's memory and ability to learn, reason, make judgments, communicate and carry out daily activities.

As Alzheimer's progresses, individuals may also experience changes in personality and behavior such as anxiety, suspiciousness or agitation, as well as delusions or hallucinations.

According to Carl Tyler, M.D., of Fairview/Cleveland Clinic Family Medicine Residency in Cleveland, Ohio, "Individuals with Alzheimer's may overestimate their abilities and want to continue to perform activities that are no longer safe such as driving or cooking. Later on, they may wander from home and lose their way back or dress in clothing inappropriate for weather conditions," continued Tyler.

Many individuals with Alzheimer's and their families find behavioral and psychiatric symptoms to be the most challenging and distressing effects of the disease. These symptoms are often a determining factor in a family's decision to place a loved one in residential care. They also often have an enormous impact on care and quality of life for individuals living in long-term care facilities.

There are two distinct types of treatments for agitation—non-drug interventions and prescription medications. Non-drug interventions should be tried first. In general, steps to managing agitation include identifying the behavior, understanding its cause and adapting the care giving environment to remedy the situation.

Behavior problems may occur more often when the patient is tired or hungry so attention to sleep, nutrition and comfort by maintaining a daily schedule can help patients function their best," said Tyler

Correctly identifying what has triggered symptoms can often help in selecting the best behavioral intervention. A key principle of intervention is redirecting the affected individual's attention, rather than arguing, disagreeing or being confrontational with the person.

Medications can be effective in some situations, but must be used carefully and are most effective when combined with non-drug approaches. Medications should target specific symptoms so the effect can be monitored. In general, it is best to start with a low dose of a single medication. According to the Alzheimer's Association, people with dementia are susceptible to serious side effects including a slightly increased risk of death from antipsychotic medications.

“Medications may help at certain stages of Alzheimer’s but not others, said Tyler. “Patients with Alzheimer’s disease need regular follow-up care from their family physician to assure their medications are appropriate for their stage of disease,” continued Tyler.

For more information on behavioral treatments for Alzheimer’s disease, see your family physician.

The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians is a statewide professional association with more than 4,400 members, including practicing physicians, family medicine residents and medical students. The scope of family medicine encompasses all ages, both sexes and every disease entity. Family physicians provide comprehensive, continuing care to all members of the family.

FACT SHEET

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Intervention Strategies

- Simplify the environment
- Simplify tasks and routines
- Allow adequate rest between stimulating events
- Use labels to cue or remind the person
- Equip doors and gates with safety locks
- Remove guns
- Use lighting to reduce confusion and restlessness at night

Medications to Treat Behavioral Symptoms

- Antidepressant medications
- Anti-anxiety drugs
- Antipsychotic medications
- Sedative medications

Source: www.alz.org