

In-depth overview of vascular dementia: Part two

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In last month's *Memory Moment* article, we discussed vascular dementia, the second most common type of dementia behind Alzheimer's disease. We went through the ins and outs of the disease, highlighting common causes, symptoms, and information about diagnosis and medication treatment. If you missed last month's article, check out www.effinghamalz.org to read part one. This month's article, Part two, focuses on managing your cardiovascular health. Poor cardiovascular health or blood supply can lead to vascular dementia, with damage occurring in the brain gradually over time or suddenly with a major stroke or series of smaller strokes.

Vascular dementia is a type of dementia that I think about often in terms of my own health. With a family history of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes, I'm very aware of my increased risk of this dementia. Although 'on my radar', I was very surprised last year when a routine blood test came back with my total cholesterol at 270 mg/dL and my LDL (or 'bad') cholesterol at 170 mg/dL. To put this in perspective, the 'normal' range of total cholesterol is between 125-200 mg/dL, and LDL cholesterol below 130 mg/dL. Needless to say, at age 24, these numbers came as a surprise to me. I was fairly active (exercising 3-4 times a week) and eating what I thought was an 'okay' diet. But there I was, in my doctor's office, being told that if I couldn't make drastic changes to my lifestyle, I would have to take a statin, which is one of the most common high cholesterol medications. My doctor cautioned me that due to my family history, I might not be able to change my lifestyle enough to make a difference if genetics were against me. My doctor and I made a plan for me to return six months later for another blood test. In the work I do, I constantly talk with people about the latest research on heart healthy diets; now, I was going to have to live it.

You might be thinking, I know plenty of people who have high cholesterol, that's just normal once you get to a certain age, right? Wrong! Over time, chronic high cholesterol leads to fat buildup in the body, contributing to heart attacks and stroke. Many of the clients I see who have a progressive type of dementia like Alzheimer's disease or vascular dementia, often have high cholesterol as well. Although my observations are purely anecdotal, research backs this up. Poor cardiovascular health is one of the significant risk factors for vascular disease especially, but also for the most common type of dementia, Alzheimer's disease. By managing high cholesterol early in life, blockages and damage to the cardiovascular system can be lessened and risk for a dementia reduced.

So, after my blood test, I started looking at ways to reduce my intake of foods high in saturated fat and cholesterol. I started reading nutrition labels more thoroughly and realized that some staples I thought were 'healthy' like my favorite granola bar were actually providing over 30% of my daily saturated fat intake before the clock even hit 9 AM. I started looking for veggie forward dishes, a clear departure from my upbringing on a cattle farm. While there are plenty of heart healthy diets, I found that the 'Mediterranean' diet which is largely touted as a preventative diet for dementia quickly became my best friend. This diet is built on utilizing plant-based foods such as vegetables, whole grains, beans, and nuts; replacing butter with healthy fats like olive oil; replacing salt with herbs and spices; and substituting red meat for fish or chicken. Adopting this diet also meant limiting my dairy intake, particularly cheese. I started switching to almond milk and fatfree

feta cheese. Another piece to living the heart healthy diet is incorporating activity into every day. Even if it was just a walk on my lunch break, I focused on moving at least 15-20 minutes a day, ideally more if I could make time.

Over the next couple of months, my lifestyle began changing in ways that I would never have thought. Losing extra weight and honing in on my diet and exercise was life-changing and was luckily reflected in my return blood test. My total cholesterol had dropped to 188 mg/dL from 271 mg/dL and my LDL cholesterol had dropped to 95 mg/dL from 170 mg/dL. I was thrilled that I could see a drastic change. Although I know it will become more challenging to manage my cholesterol levels as I age, especially with genetics against me, creating positive lifestyle changes now is making a big difference in how I think about dementia risk. Each day I realize that I have to make a conscious choice to focus on my health. Gone are the days of repeated endless chocolate binges or fettucine alfredo, even though I still have days when I could do better with my diet. But that's okay. I've discovered foods and recipes that I would have probably turned my nose up to prior to this experience. One of my favorites now is chickpea blondies, which uses healthy nut butter and honey (let me know if you'd like the recipe!).

Let's face it, changing is hard. Making big diet and exercise changes can be really challenging, especially if you're doing it alone. I also realize that it is a lot easier for me to alter my lifestyle at age 24 than it would be for a person who is later in life. Nonetheless, whatever age, there's always opportunity to focus on health, and look for ways to reduce your risk of developing an awful disease like vascular dementia. I promise you won't be sorry you did!

Much of the information in this article has been condensed from the Alzheimer's Association, Mayo Clinic, and the American Heart Association websites, which have valuable resources and guidance for families dealing with this disease. Our Forget-Me-Not Resource centers housed in local libraries in Coles, Clay, Cumberland, Effingham, Fayette, Jasper, and Shelby counties, also has valuable books and DVDs devoted to vascular dementia.

For more information about Memory Moment articles & Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness, check out their website at www.effinghamalz.org. If you are a caregiver & have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free to call Shannon Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372