The New York Physical Therapy Association explains how exercise may help reduce the symptoms of Alzheimer’s Disease

A recent study suggests that moderate to vigorous activity actually reduces the loss of brain tissue in the memory center of the brain.

Albany, NY (PRWEB) March 23, 2015 -- Alzheimer’s disease is a progressive degenerative disorder that attacks the brain's nerve cells resulting in memory loss, reduced language skills, poor judgment, disorientation, and difficulty with activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing and grooming. These effects were well depicted in the 2014 Academy Award winning movie Still Alice, which strikingly depicted the devastating effects Alzheimer’s disease has on individuals, loved ones, and caretakers. By 2025, the number of adults 65 years or older that are affected by Alzheimer’s disease is estimated to reach 7.1 million – a 40% increase from the 5 million aged 65 and older affected today. (1)

Recent evidence suggests that exercise can reduce the symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. (2-4) A study by Roa et al published in 2014 showed that moderate to vigorous activity actually reduces the loss of brain tissue in the memory center.(5) Participants in the study who had the genetic marker for Alzheimer’s and engaged in low-level activity, such as walking twice a week, had a 3% decrease in the loss of tissue after 18 months. Encouraging results were found in individuals with the genetic marker who engaged in moderate or vigorous activity such as brisk walking or swimming, on at least 3 days a week. High activity participants showed no tissue loss in the memory center after 18 months, similar to those without the Alzheimer’s genetic marker.

Physical therapists (PTs) are movement experts qualified to design safe and effective therapeutic exercise programs for people with a variety of health conditions, including Alzheimer’s disease. The study by Roa et al found promising results, but a more customized program may be necessary. A PT on the team would take into account the stage of disease, general fitness level, and complicating health conditions such as heart disease or orthopedic problems.

Dr. Suzanne Renee O'Brien, PT, PhD, NCS points out how having a physical therapist involved in the care of an individual with Alzheimer’s disease can help. “In the earliest stages (1 or 2), continuing any form of exercise is advisable. Whether the person swims, runs, bikes, or gardens, staying active is the key to maintaining function. While the person is continuing their exercise routine, a physical therapist would intervene with agility, speed, and balance activities, and a home program, to practice on their own.” Dr. O’Brien continues, “Later, at stage 3, as functional loss occurs, the PT would still prioritize exercises aimed at agility, speed, and balance, while determining if an assistive device would alleviate the risk of falls. In this stage, falls prevention is paramount and agility, speed, and balance would all contribute to such prevention.”

Alzheimer’s disease is a devastating condition that impacts not only the individual who has the condition, but the caregiver and loved ones. The family and caregiver may need instruction in how to safely move, lift or transfer the person with Alzheimer’s disease to prevent injury to the caregiver as well as the person with Alzheimer’s disease. In addition to hands–on care, physical therapists provide caregiver training to improve safety and to decrease the risk of injury. For instance, the therapist can show a caregiver how to use adaptive equipment and assistive devices such as special seating systems, canes, or long handled reachers, as well as how to use good “body mechanics” (the way you physically move to do a task).

Although there is no cure, there are opportunities, with the support of health care professionals such as physical
therapists, to slow the progression, maximize function, and assist caregivers to allow the best quality of life for everyone involved.

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NYPTA represents the interests of approximately 30,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students of physical therapy in New York. Its goal is to foster advancements in physical therapy practice, research, and education. Learn more about conditions physical therapists can treat, and find a physical therapist in your area, at www.moveforwardny.com


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