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Column: The mind-body-spirit connection

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"Oh, no! I'm getting "old-timers" disease," says my 82 year old mom, with a twinkle in her eye. Blessed with a clear head and a strong memory, she is, fortunately, only teasing. Sadly, many people and their families find Alzheimer's Disease nothing to kid about. Someone is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in the United States every 72 seconds.

In fact, an estimated 10 million baby boomers will develop Alzheimer's at some point in their lifetime according to the Alzheimer's Association. That translates into one out of every eight baby boomers.

Advancing age is the number one risk factor in developing Alzheimer's. Also, an individual who has a parent or a sibling with Alzheimer's is two to three times more likely than someone without a close relative with Alzheimer's.

While both aging and family are out of your control, recent research indicates that lifestyle changes can have a positive effect and potentially reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's. A link between head trauma and later development of Alzheimer's has been found, so it is wise to use safety precautions, such as wearing a helmet when biking, or always fastening your seat belt when in the car. There is mounting evidence that quitting smoking, exercising, and a healthy diet may also be beneficial in reducing the risk.

Experts recommend avoiding excessive calories and following general food guidelines. Antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids, acetyl-L-carnitine, phosphatidylcholine, phosphatidylserine, vitamin B, and Vitamin E supplementation may help prevent or delay dementia, according to naturopathic doctors Erica Oberg and Laurie Mischley. A 21 year Swedish study of 1449 individuals revealed "...a moderate intake of unsaturated fats at midlife is protective, whereas a moderate intake of saturated fats may increase the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease." Other foods and extracts that may assist with keeping your mind healthy include polyphenolic extract (grape seed extract), as well as polyphenol-rich fruits such as apples, oranges, and bananas. Oberg & Mischley report that further research shows that the herbal remedies ginkgo bilboa, huperzine A, lemon balm, and sage may be beneficial in preventing or delaying dementia.

Fully research and seek professional guidance if you are considering the use of supplements and herbs. Talk to your doctor, and visit the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine on line for more information.

Music, known by many to affect our emotions and evoke memories, is also thought to stimulate the brain. The Psychology Department of Willamette University found that after participating in 20 to 30 minute music therapy groups four times, participants

experienced significant improvement in speech content and fluency. At Florida State University, a small study showed improvement in maintaining attention and eliciting social interaction. Most of the available research on therapeutic music was conducted with people already experiencing mild cognitive impairments. Puzzles and crosswords are also beneficial at keeping your brain “exercised”.

A study published in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine in November 2006 indicated that compared to a control group, participants who received four weekly Reiki treatments showed statistically significant increases in mental functioning, memory, and behavior problems. Reiki is one of the many ways to work with healing energy, clearing, restoring, and re-balancing your energy field.

Start now to take better care of yourself. Eat well. Use your brain in creative, intellectual, and fun ways. Live long and healthy, enjoying your quality of life!