

KU Alzheimer's Disease Center speeds up search for cure

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The University of Kansas Alzheimer's Disease Center is partnering with a national nonprofit to make its clinical trials more efficient, expediting the search for a cure. The center has 24 active studies, which seek solutions for prevention of the disease and a new cure.

"We can do trials faster — and we need to," center Co-director Dr. [Jeffrey Burns](#) said. "The only way to the next treatment is through trials."



The University of Kansas Medical Center houses the school's Alzheimer's research center.
CHRIS CURRY | KCBJ

No cure exists for Alzheimer's, though treatments help mitigate symptoms. The exact cause also remains unknown.

An experimental drug trial sponsored by [Eli Lilly](#) and Co. attacked amyloid plaques, thought to be part of the cause. In November, however, a clinical trial of the drug failed, leading researchers to search for new solutions.

The KU Alzheimer's Disease Center soon will start a phase three trial of a drug that targets the buildup of "tangles," another characteristic of Alzheimer's. On the preventive side, the center also is running numerous trials on the effects of exercise and blood pressure on brain health.

During the next three years, Burns said, the center aims to enroll 700 volunteers.

"We're going after a number of targets," Burns said. "We just need more wins."

The university recently started partnering with the Global Alzheimer's Platform Foundation, joining a network of 45 clinical sites to help expedite the research process.

[John Dwyer](#), a "serial entrepreneur" who is president of the GAP Foundation, said it was created to help researchers be more effective at clinical trials. His goal is to shorten this process by two years; trials can take from five to 10 years.

"The time it takes to do a clinical trial in Alzheimer's is a big barrier," he said. "It's real money."

On a national level, Alzheimer's is estimated to cost the U.S. about \$643 billion. In Kansas City alone, there are about 55,000 differentiated diagnoses a year, and it's the sixth leading cause of death in the country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

One of the biggest limitations in running a trial is enrollment, Burns said. The process can add years to the time a study takes.

"Every researcher struggles with it, and it slows trials down enormously," he said.

Dwyer's network also will put together standards for patient safety and drug company contracts, which he said will reduce time requirements by six months.

"I think it will translate into faster trials, which will translate into getting to next therapy more quickly," he said. "We aspire to create the same kind of sustainable activity as you see in cardiology or oncology."

Elise reports on health care, life sciences and publicly traded technology companies.