

KC HISPANIC NEWS

Studies show Hispanics may be more prone to Alzheimer's

By Joe Arce & Corbin Crable
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Forgetting why you walked into a room, having to repeat questions, and forgetting familiar faces aren't just symptoms of getting older. Quite often, they're indicative of something much more serious.



That's the message that the University of Kansas Alzheimer's Disease Center hopes to impart to those people at highest risk of Alzheimer's or dementia. The center regularly seeks volunteers to participate in studies of how Alzheimer's affects at-risk populations – especially older Hispanics.

"We see people from any range of the spectrum," says Dr. Jaime Perales of the center, who is leading the studies. "The first visit (for study subjects) is more like an interview – medical history, family history, social demographics. Then, we do cognitive tests, or paper-and-pencil memory tests. We have

thresholds we (set), and if the subject goes under the threshold, we can see it might be because of Alzheimer's or other dementia."

The center is actively seeking Hispanic volunteers, Perales adds. Guadalupe Centers is assisting with finding volunteers for the research. Mary Corona of Kansas City was one of those volunteers who participated in the tests recently.

"I just wanted to find out what you can do to prevent Alzheimer's," Corona says. "I've had an aunt and uncle who had it. They had good lives, but what caused it? It's a mystery. We don't know."

Corona urges members of the Hispanic population specifically to take charge of their future and that they can take measures to protect them from being at greater risk of an Alzheimer's diagnosis.

"There was an article that showed Hispanics are more prone to Alzheimer's," Corona says. "It appears it's the culture – the way they eat, (and) they don't exercise. I try to keep my mind active and to exercise – fun things like bowling."

Perales says that increased risk is exactly why he encourages Hispanics to participate in his studies, especially those over the age of 60.

"Latinos have lower access to education. The higher education level someone has, the more neural connections someone has in their brain," he explains. "With a higher education, you'll have a job that pays better, and you'll have insurance that can cover (preventative measures). Latinos are also more likely to have higher rates of obesity, Type II diabetes, and higher blood pressure."

Perales says that in the next 40 years, the number of Hispanics with Alzheimer's is projected to increase by more than 800 percent.

“That is very alarming,” he says. “What we need to do is participate in more research, take better care of ourselves.”

That self-care, Perales adds, extends not just to those who have Alzheimer’s, but those loved ones who act as caretakers as well.

“Thirty to forty percent of relatives who take care of Alzheimer’s patients, they have depression or anxiety,” Perales says. “There is a huge amount of depression among caregivers. If we take care of them, it improves the quality of life for the person who has Alzheimer’s.”

Linda Guerra Lara, senior administrator at Guadalupe Centers, says she understand that many Hispanics may not be likely to visit a doctor when symptoms of Alzheimer’s manifest themselves in a loved one. That hesitation, too, seems to be cultural, she says.

“There’s always hesitation, especially when it comes to seniors and Latinos,” Lara says. “Culturally, unless they’ve been encouraged by a family member or a priest, they’ve always been hesitant to trust (the medical community).

Both Perales and Lara advise older Hispanic not to ignore the warning signs that something might be wrong.

“A common misconception is that people think Alzheimer’s is a normal part of aging. It’s not,” Perales says. “Not everyone who reaches the age of 100 is going to have Alzheimer’s. It will be a percentage of people, but not all of them. By exercising, by eating well, sleeping well, you reduce your chances of getting the disease.”

Lara says she agrees.

“People just say, ‘It comes with age.’ That’s how they see it,” she explains. “We need to start off with education. Knowing the difference between dementia, old age, and Alzheimer’s, people tend to ball it all into one category. A lot of them just think it’s because of their age and that it’s normal.”

Lara adds that when she works with as many familiar faces as she does each and every day, she’s quick to notice any changes in someone’s memory or behavior.

“Working in this environment, I see some of our seniors more often than their families do. If they’re here, they’re coming day to day,” Lara says. “I’ll know if something has changed when it comes to certain seniors who have been coming here for years.”

No matter the reason for one’s hesitation to learn about Alzheimer’s or the likelihood they will be diagnosed, Corona says the studies will offer insight and education, and arming oneself with that knowledge is powerful.

“The test is there. Why not benefit from it? That’s the only way you’re going to find out,” Corona says. “Why not try to learn more and help yourself?”

To learn more about the center’s study on Alzheimer’s, call Dr. Jaime Perales at (913) 588-3716 or e-mail jperales@kumc.edu.