

Being unaware of memory loss may predict Alzheimer's disease: Canadian study



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About 25,000 new cases of dementia are diagnosed every year in Canada, according to Alzheimer Society Canada.

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Just because someone has difficulty remembering things, it doesn't necessarily mean that what they're experiencing is a symptom of dementia, a new Canadian study says.

But if the person is not aware of the memory loss (a condition called anosognosia), then they are more likely to progress to Alzheimer's disease, researchers at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) say.

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“If patients complain of memory problems, but their partner or caregiver isn’t overly concerned, it’s likely that the memory loss is due to other factors, possibly depression or anxiety,” lead author Dr. Philip Gerretsen, clinical scientist in CAMH’s Geriatric Division and Campbell Family Mental Health Research Institute, said in a statement. “They can be reassured that they are unlikely to develop dementia, and the other causes of memory loss should be addressed.”

Sometimes, if the patient doesn’t feel they have any issues with their memory, it is the caregiver or partner that is more likely to be distressed by the situation. When it comes to Alzheimer’s disease, lack of such awareness is tied to being more of a burden on caregivers, researchers said.

But that unawareness of the illness paired with memory loss (known as mild cognitive impairment) can be assessed using questionnaires.

To find this out, researchers looked at data on 1,062 people between the ages of 55 and 90 from the Alzheimer’s Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI). Of those, 191 people had Alzheimer’s disease and 499 had mild cognitive impairment, while 372 served as part of the healthy comparison group. This is believed to be the largest study of its kind.

At the same time, researchers also wanted to find the parts of the brain that were impacted in impaired illness awareness. They looked at the brain’s uptake of glucose, which brain cells need to function. However, glucose uptake is impaired in patients with Alzheimer’s.

What researchers found using PET brain scans was that those who had impaired illness awareness also had decreased glucose uptake, like age and degree of memory loss.

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The study was published this week in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry.

This isn’t the only study to have questioned previously held beliefs about Alzheimer’s.

A study by Florida State University in September found that personality changes aren’t often a predictor of clinical onset of Alzheimer’s.

Up until now, scientists and physicians debated whether or not changes in one’s personality and behaviour appeared before the onset of the disease. But after looking at data of over 2,000 people between 1980 and 2016 from the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging, researchers in this study found no evidence of such a link.

In fact, researchers said that the personality of the study’s participants remained stable even up until the last few years before the onset of mild cognitive impairment.

However, while personality change was not an early sign of dementia, certain personality traits (like high levels of neuroticism and low levels of conscientiousness) are still risk factors for dementia.

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