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Can You Prevent Alzheimer's Disease?

Nervous Boomers Experiment with Controversial Regimens; A Patient Takes 25 Pills a Day

EVERY DAY, Dewey Moede, a healthy 45-year-old owner of a New Mexico radio network, swallows a little tan pill with brown flecks. It's an anti-oxidant vitamin and mineral concoction called Memory reVITALIZER® previously Memory Support that his doctor sold to him as a preventive for Alzheimer's disease.

"It acts as little maids going up to your brain and scrubbing out the rust," Mr. Moede explains. He says he takes it because he wants to live to a ripe old age, with all of his mental faculties in place. "I'd rather wear out instead of rust out."

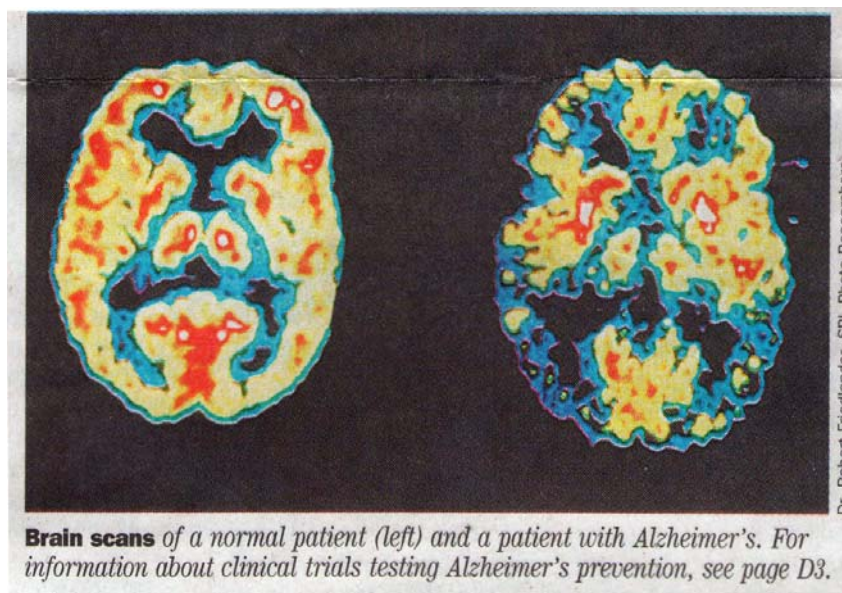
Losing one's mental edge is one of the most dreaded scenarios of the Baby Boom generation's nightmares about aging. Plastic surgery can rejuvenate the body's exterior. Worn-out hips, busted knees and faulty heart valves can be replaced and upgraded with high-tech equivalents. But keeping the wolves of mental deterioration and senility at bay is a far tougher prospect.

A flurry of recent headlines reporting promising-yet inconclusive-research on the potential of numerous therapies to stave off Alzheimer's is leading some people as young as their forties to try everything from Advil to cholesterol drugs to preserve their mental acuity.

The studies cover a wide range of substances: anti-inflammatories, cholesterol-lowering drugs called statins, estrogen, antioxidants like Vitamin E and the herbal supplement ginkgo biloba. Just yesterday came the latest. The journal *Nature* reported that scientists have created a drug that attacks a protein involved in the formation of the sticky "plaque" responsible for clogging the brains of Alzheimer's patients. (See Page D3.)

Most physicians blanch at the notion of ingesting an untested mix of substances and warn that fear of the degenerative brain disease could lead healthy people to take potentially toxic combinations.

"We don't know if they will work in combination or if you'll get additional toxicity by putting



them together," warns Bill Thies, vice president of medical and scientific affairs for the Alzheimer's Association, "The impact of multiple medications may do some harm and may not do any good. It's a completely unexplored area."

Nevertheless, prevention is a growing focus of Alzheimer's research. Three clinical trials evaluating prevention therapies, sponsored by the federal National Institute on Aging, are currently recruiting participants. "We're headed toward prevention rather than treatment after the fact," says Dr. Ronald Petersen, head of the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

There are four million Americans diagnosed with Alzheimer's, according to the Alzheimer's Association, and roughly 19 million people have a family member suffering from the disease, which could make them genetically predisposed to it. Four different genes have been linked to the disease. But having one of them doesn't necessarily mean you'll develop Alzheimer's, just that you might. It's now possible for people to find out if they have an Alzheimer's gene, but predictive genetic testing is usually available only for individuals who have a family member who got the disease before age 60. To date, the federal Food and Drug Administration has approved four medications that temporarily relieve some symptoms of Alzheimer's in diagnosed cases. They are tacrine, donepezil, rivastigmine and galantamine. There are no approved drugs for prevention.

Yet in New York City, a 59-year-old investment adviser who lost his father to Alzheimer's imbibes a daily pill cocktail of prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications and vitamins in his effort to stave off the disease, for which he carries the genetic marker. He ingests 11 pills in the morning and another 14 pills at night, recommended to him by Richard P. Brown, a psychiatrist at Columbia University. The list of pills literally goes from A (Aspirin) to Z (Zocor).

"Once you've seen somebody die of this and losing consciousness of who they are, you want to do something about it even if there is no cure," says the patient who wishes to remain anonymous. He says he isn't worried that what he's taking is unproven to be effective in preventing Alzheimer's. "I'm much more worried about reading that article at age 65 that says I should've started (a preventive regimen) much earlier."

Dr. Brown, his physician, says he has 25 patients between ages of 45 to 65 following a preventive regimen. They include several doctors, investment bankers, lawyers and many business executives who he says "want to get more out of life" for as long as they can.

He has put them on what he calls a "holistic approach" consisting of diet, exercise, vitamins, herbal remedies and prescription medications including, in some cases, cholesterol-lowering drugs. He tailors the program based on the patient's profile. He will even prescribe deprenyl, a medication used to treat Parkinson's disease, to some patients, a drug he says enhances nerve cell function in the brain.

Dr. Brown says he knows what he is doing is out of the mainstream but he says he's very upfront with his patients, informing them of the "imperfect state of our knowledge."

"There's a whole generation of people facing an epidemic of Alzheimer's and some of us don't feel like going like sheep to the slaughter," he says.

But Dr. Thies of the Alzheimer's Association says that anyone who is determined to take multiple pills and tablets under the guise of prevention should, at the very least, inform their primary care physician of such use to prevent dangerous interactions.

William Summers, who was a principal investigator on the first study of tacrine in treating Alzheimer's, created the Memory reVITALIZER® previously Memory Support pill that Mr. Moede, the New Mexico radio network owner, ingests. Dr. Summers Web site describes it as a "synergistic combination" of antioxidant amino acids, herbal extracts, minerals, and vitamins." He says he originally intended it as a Neuroceutical supplement for his patients already diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

But some of their care givers started requesting the pill for themselves after witnessing a positive effect on the Alzheimer's patients who took it. One was Diane, Sheldon, who takes care of her Alzheimer's-stricken husband. After starting the pill she says she now gets a better score when she plays a computer game that tests memory recall. "Things are easier to remember, plus I feel good with it."

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