

Valley Voice: Senior health includes cognitive fitness

Chris Flores, Special to The Desert Sun 5:28 p.m. PST December 1, 2014



(Photo: Courtesy)

Re

: "Coachella Valley seniors exhibit healthy behaviors" Victoria Pelham, Nov. 24.

The story on the Health Assessment Resource Center (HARC) report on elder health was a wonderful and thorough summary of this important research data.

Unfortunately there was no mention of dementia and cognitive impairment. Memory loss and brain disabilities associated with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias are a huge issue for valley seniors. Research confirms that dementia is a common problem that becomes more prevalent the older we get. Almost one out of five seniors older than 65 has some sort of cognitive impairment, and once we get over age 80 the prevalence of dementia approaches 50 percent. Many seniors who have significant memory loss or dementia are not formally diagnosed. This means there are a large number of people in our valley that have dementia and their families and loved ones are not aware of the problem.

The HARC study did not include questions about dementia or memory loss this year, but I hope that this is highlighted in future surveys. Meanwhile, we need to focus on three tasks:

- There are steps we should take to prevent or delay dementia and memory loss in our own lives — getting regular aerobic exercise, eating a heart-healthy Mediterranean-style diet and making sure we control all of our risk factors for heart attack (quitting smoking, lowering our cholesterol, and tightly managing our blood pressure and blood sugar). Regular check-ups should identify other conditions that can lead to cognitive impairment, like thyroid disorders, sleep apnea, irregular heart beats that contribute to stroke, depression and vitamin deficiencies.

- Although there is no cure for dementia at this time, there is a lot that we can do to optimize memory and function in a person with dementia. Many common medications can worsen memory and confusion in people with dementia. These should be reviewed by a medical provider and eliminated if possible. There are prescription medications that can stabilize patients and slow progression of disease if they are used appropriately. Families and caregivers can learn skills and techniques to handle and prevent difficult behaviors in people affected with dementia. Underlying medical conditions like infections and pain can trigger episodes of confusion and disorientation, so regular care is essential to keep dementia in check.

- Additionally, we need to face the fact that many in our community are suffering from disabling memory loss and dementia. To this end, I am involved with an initiative of the local Alzheimer's Association called the "Dementia Friendly Coachella Valley" network. We are working toward increasing awareness of dementia and memory loss in our communities, and we have a variety of programs in the works to accomplish this.

Please join us for a free Dementia Café being held 3:30-5:30 p.m. Wednesday at PF Chang's China Bistro at the River in Rancho Mirage. This is an informal and fun event where anyone affected or touched by dementia can mingle and chat with community experts and members of the Alzheimer's Association. Come out and make some new friends and help increase awareness of dementia in the Coachella Valley.

Chris Flores of Palm Desert is a physician. Email him at c_flores_md@yahoo.com

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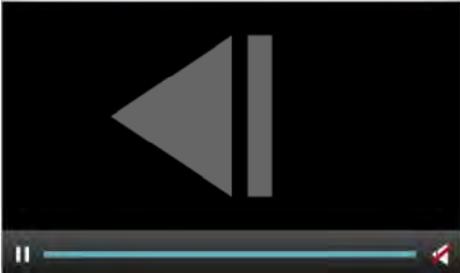


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