

Does She Really Need a Diagnosis?

When interacting with families, I often hear this question: *“Why should we bother taking Mom to the doctor? We already know she is confused. Isn’t that just what happens in old age?”*

The reality is that thinking and reasoning do slow down in your senior years. Older adults may not be able to multi-task as effortlessly as the younger generation. And, a decline in vision or hearing can often make matters worse. However, brain diseases, such as Alzheimer’s and other dementias, are not a normal course of aging. Significant memory loss and confusion that impact daily life are not what “just happens in old age.” In fact, such symptoms are a perfect reason to see a medical professional.

An adult who shows signs of confusion or memory loss could be experiencing a variety of health concerns. Vitamin deficiencies, medication, thyroid disease and chronic depression are just a few of the conditions that may cause problems with memory and thinking, and may be misinterpreted as a form of dementia. These conditions are often easily treated and reversed, allowing the individual to return to a normal life. Memory loss does not always indicate Alzheimer’s disease.

It is important to have a thorough examination by a medical professional to rule out any and all health concerns that might be causing memory loss and confusion. A complete diagnosis should include blood tests, a review of all medications, and a psychiatric examination to check for depression or other mental health concerns. Brain imaging will detect signs of stroke, brain tumor or hydrocephalus. And cognitive testing will help to evaluate where deficits exist, such as language skills, memory, reasoning or judgment. There is no specific test to confirm a progressive brain disease, but a good diagnosis will serve to rule-out all other possibilities.

In some cases, the individual will receive a diagnosis of “Probable Dementia”, such as Alzheimer’s disease or Vascular dementia. While there is no cure for most progressive brain diseases, an early diagnosis provides the best options for treatment. Current medications used to treat Alzheimer’s disease are most effective in the earlier stages of the disease. These medications may allow the individual to delay the onset of more serious symptoms and remain in an earlier, more productive stage for a longer period of time.

In addition, when a dementia is diagnosed early, individuals are able to participate in planning for future care. While everyone faces cognitive decline in his own unique way, an early diagnosis has helped some to embrace their dementia and plan for the future. Early in the disease process, legal documents can be signed, financial arrangements can be made, and the individual can express his personal wishes for care as the disease progresses.

A diagnosis for memory loss and confusion can help the entire family stop guessing and begin to move forward with a plan of care for their loved one. It can be the beginning of a journey that is managed best with clear information and education.

Written by
Nancy Dezan, BSW, CMC
Aging Life Care Manager