

Voices

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California

With recent advances, it's 'a very exciting time' for dementia researchers



Dr. Dung Trinh, a board member of Alzheimer's Los Angeles, will join other experts at upcoming events to explain advances in detection, prevention and treatment of the disease. (Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times)



By Steve Lopez

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- Dementia cases in the U.S. are expected to double by 2060.

- Doctors tell patients to follow the Life's Essential Eight strategy: Better diet, more exercise, no smoking, healthy sleep, and manage cholesterol, blood sugar and blood pressure.

Like a lot of people my age, there are times when I can't find my keys, or my sunglasses, or my phone.

Now and again, I'll get an idea to look something up, reach for my computer, and forget what it was.

Normal aging?

Signs of cognitive impairment?

I'm not sure, but if you have similar questions about yourself or a loved one, and you'd like to know when to get help and what's available, you can get answers at three upcoming conferences hosted by [Alzheimer's Los Angeles](#) (details below). An A-Team of experts will explain recent advances in prevention, early detection and treatment.

There are no cures yet for dementia, an umbrella term for cognitive disorders, of which Alzheimer's is the most common. But thanks to advances in recent years, drugs can treat some symptoms of mild and even moderate impairment, and with the number of dementia cases in the U.S. [expected to double](#) by 2060 as the population ages and people live longer, there's hope for continued progress.

There's been "a dramatic increase in the number of clinical trials testing new therapies," said Heather Cooper Ortner, president and chief executive of Alzheimer's Los Angeles. There's ongoing research into drugs that might "enhance cognition or treat challenging behaviors like agitation, depression, hallucinations, and other neuro-psychiatric or behavioral symptoms."

In just the last few months, doctors were encouraged by [FDA approval in May](#) of a blood test that can help with early diagnosis of Alzheimer's, and with growing evidence that lifestyle choices can improve mental acuity.

"This happens to be a very exciting time," said Dr. David Reuben, director of the UCLA Alzheimer's and Dementia Care program. "I just gave a talk on the state of dementia in 2025, and most of what we're talking about, 10 years ago would have been fiction."

If you're among the millions of people with risk factors for developing dementia, it might be possible not only to delay memory loss, but to improve mental function.

Without taking any medication.

The [U.S. POINTER Study](#) tracked more than 2,000 people in five locations for two years, with a regimen of physical activity, brain exercises, healthy diet and social engagement. Northern California participants participated under the direction of [UC Davis Health](#).

None of the participants had a dementia diagnosis, but they had risk factors including family history, cardiovascular disease, poor diets and sedentary lifestyles.

Half the group had coaching, the other half was on its own.

Both groups showed cognitive improvement, as reported in the [Journal of American Medicine](#).

“What you do that is good for your body is also good for your brain,” said Dr. Dung Trinh, a researcher at the [Healthy Brain Clinic](#) in Long Beach and a board member at Alzheimer’s Los Angeles.

Dr. Zaldy Tan, medical director of Cedars-Sinai’s Memory and Aging Program, was in the Toronto audience when the POINTER results were announced, as was Trinh.

“I can tell you there was a standing ovation,” Tan said.

Some experts noted the improvements could be explained at least in part by what’s known as [“practice effect,”](#) meaning that participants became better at cognitive testing with multiple screenings. But the study was based on one conducted a decade ago, in Finland, which had similar findings.

Trinh said he preaches the same lifestyle choices to patients.

“We saw an increase in Alzheimer’s and memory decline during the pandemic, when we were all shut down and nobody was socializing,” he said. “There was greater risk of mental health issues, including cognitive issues. It has everything to do with using your brain to connect, to socialize, to have purpose.”

The POINTER participants, who were between 60 and 79, followed the [MIND diet](#), a variation of the Mediterranean diet. Lots of vegetables (especially leafy), berries, beans,

nuts, whole grains, fish and chicken. And very little fried and processed foods, red meat, cheese and sweets.

They did 30 minutes of moderate to intense aerobic activity four times a week, with strength and flexibility training twice a week. The program included three weekly 30-minute computer-based cognitive exercises, social activities and regular health monitoring.

“It seems to be delaying the rate of brain aging,” said Dr. Tan, but getting people to follow these guidelines on their own, in any large-scale way, would be a massive undertaking.

And half-measures might not produce desired outcomes.

“The devil is in the details,” Tan said. “People with blood pressure of 145 over 95 might be told by their primary care physician ... that’s fine ... just exercise more.”

But they should work toward a blood pressure target of 120 over 80, he said, and the exercise can’t be just a walk in the park.

“The more exercise you do, the better,” said Reuben, a vegetarian who swims four days a week, jogs three days and does yoga on weekends. “The big benefit is going from sitting in front of the screen to doing something. I tell [patients] to start with five minutes, twice a day, and build up. A half-hour a day is when they start seeing a lot of gain.”

In the early days of research, dementia was diagnosed only in autopsies, and later through spinal fluid or PET scans. In the continuing evolution of the science, the FDA-

approved diagnostic blood test — which costs several hundred dollars and isn't yet covered by insurance — is a much simpler way to detect biomarkers for Alzheimer's disease.

“Now we realize the scope of the illness can start 15 years before there are symptoms,” said Dr. Helena Chui, a Keck Hospital of USC neurologist and principal investigator of the Alzheimer Disease Research Center.

That gives doctors and patients a head start in either preventing or delaying progression of the disease with medical intervention or lifestyle changes, Chui said. She tells her patients to follow the Life's Essential Eight strategy.

Better diet, more exercise, no smoking, healthy sleep, and manage cholesterol, blood sugar and blood pressure.

Drs. Chui, Reuben and Trinh will be among the experts elaborating on all of this at a [conference on Saturday](#), Sept. 13, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Skirball Center. Another conference, in Spanish, will be held in Downey on Sept. 26, and another, geared toward the Black community, will be held Oct. 4 at Cal State Dominguez Hills.

They're all free, and you can register to attend at alzheimersla.org

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Steve Lopez is a California native who has been a Los Angeles Times columnist since 2001. He has won more than a dozen national journalism awards and is a four-time Pulitzer finalist. Lopez is the author most recently of “Independence Day: What I Learned About Retirement, From Some Who’ve Done It and Some Who Never Will.” His book “The Soloist,” inspired by his columns on his relationship with a Juilliard-trained homeless person, was a Los Angeles Times and New York Times best-seller, winner of the PEN USA Literary Award for Non-Fiction, and the subject of a Dream Works movie by the same name. He has also written three novels and two column collections.

