

## News from the Alzheimer Society of Canada

### 2004 Awareness Campaign: Addressing the Myths of Alzheimer Disease

Do your patients think that cooking with aluminum pots and pans can cause Alzheimer Disease (AD)? Do they believe that AD can be prevented by exercising and taking vitamin supplements? Surprisingly, many other Canadians think the same way, judging from the questions the Alzheimer Society receives on a daily basis. As increasing numbers of Canadians are expected to develop AD and related dementias in the coming years—750,000 by the year 2031—the importance of teaching Canadians some basic facts about the disease becomes crucial.

January is Alzheimer Awareness Month in Canada and the 2004 Awareness Campaign aims to dispel the myths surrounding AD. Below are 10 common misconceptions about AD.

#### **Myth 1:**

Because someone in my family has AD, I'm going to get it.

#### **Reality:**

Although genetics play a role in the disease, only 5% to 10% of AD cases derive from genes that cause the disease. The majority of cases have no single identifiable cause. The role of genetics continues to be studied.

#### **Myth 2:**

AD is only an old person's disease.

#### **Reality:**

While age is the most significant known risk factor for AD, not everyone will develop the disease as they age. People at the ages of 40 years and 50 years

can also be affected. What is most important for people to understand is that AD is not a normal part of aging.

#### **Myth 3:**

There is a cure for AD.

#### **Reality:**

There is no cure for AD, but there are medications and other approaches that can manage some of the symptoms in some people. The good news is that AD researchers have made great strides and are optimistic about finding a cure.

#### **Myth 4:**

Memory loss means AD.

#### **Reality:**

Many people have trouble with their memory, but this by itself does not mean they have AD. When memory loss affects day-to-day function and is coupled with lack of judgment and reasoning, or there are changes in communication abilities, it is best to visit a doctor to determine the cause of the symptoms.

#### **Myth 5:**

Aluminum causes AD.

#### **Reality:**

Although there has been a lot of research into the connection between aluminum and AD, there is no conclusive evidence to show a link. The disease may develop from a combination of many risk factors, including genetics, lifestyle and environmental factors.

### **Myth 6:**

AD is preventable.

### **Reality:**

Because there is no known cause for AD, there is no conclusive evidence that the disease can be prevented. There is, however, a growing amount of evidence that lifestyle choices directed at keeping the mind and body fit may help reduce the risk. These choices include physical exercise, a healthy diet including fresh fruits, vegetables, and fish, as well as keeping your brain active.

### **Myth 7:**

Vitamins, supplements and memory boosters can prevent AD.

### **Reality:**

Many studies have been done to test the effectiveness of products such as vitamin E, vitamin B, and Ginkgo biloba in preventing AD. The findings are inconclusive, however research in this area is ongoing.

### **Myth 8:**

If I'm diagnosed with AD, my life is over.

### **Reality:**

Many people with the disease live meaningful, active lives. They have a sense of purpose and do not feel their lives are over. Earlier diagnosis and medications are helping. It is also important to provide appropriate surroundings, services, support and activities to people with the disease, to help enrich their quality of life throughout the progression of disease.

### **Myth 9:**

All people who have AD become violent and aggressive.

### **Reality:**

AD affects each person differently. For a person with AD, the loss of memory and the resulting confusion is often frustrating or even frightening. By learning about the disease, adapting the person's surroundings and changing the way we communicate with the person, aggressive responses may be preventable.

### **Myth 10:**

People with AD cannot understand what is going on around them.

### **Reality:**

Some people with AD do understand what is going on around them; others have difficulty. AD does affect a person's ability to communicate and make sense of the world around them. When we assume someone does not understand, feelings can be hurt unintentionally. The fact is a person with AD is still the same person as before, and needs to be treated with dignity and respect.

The Alzheimer Society's Awareness Campaign kicks off January 5, 2004 with the release of its new brochure *Dispelling the myths* (available in English and French).

**Update:** *Safely Home—Alzheimer Wandering Registry*. On October 8, 2003 the Society's Wandering Registry program was given a new name to more accurately reflect the goal of the program: to return a person safely home. *Safely Home* is a nationwide program designed to help find a person with AD who is lost and assist him/her in a safe return home. Vital information about registrants is stored confidentially on a police database accessible by police anywhere in Canada and the United States. *Safely Home* is available to those living at home or in a long-term care facility.

Also, thanks to foundation and corporate support, *Safely Home* is undergoing a number of enhancement initiatives to further improve the program in 2004.

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*The Alzheimer Society of Canada is a not-for-profit health organization dedicated to helping those affected by Alzheimer Disease. The Society provides support and educational programs for people with Alzheimer Disease and their caregivers. The Society also funds research into finding the causes and cure of the disease, and into improved methods of caregiving.*

*For more information on Alzheimer Disease and related dementias, Alzheimer Society programs and services, and how you can help, contact your local Alzheimer Society or visit the Society's website at [www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca) or call 1-800-616-8816.*