

Memory testing urged for seniors

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HERALD NEWS

PATERSON -- A 10-minute test could have detected the dementia that Keschia Spencer's grandmother hid so well.

When she hit her 60s, Spencer's grandmother first grew forgetful, skipping meals on occasion and misplacing items around the house. She was adept at evading her family's worried inquiries, and they only discovered the depths of her confusion when she disappeared one day, wandering the streets for hours in her pajamas.

"She thought she was going to work," said Spencer, 36, a home health aide in Paterson. "Her mind was reversing much quicker than we knew."

On Tuesday, HomeCare Options, a nonprofit Paterson health agency where Spencer works, will join nearly 2,000 other organizations participating in National Memory Testing Day. The Alzheimer's Foundation of America began the national effort five years ago to get older adults to assess whether occasional memory lapses spell deeper problems.

"We're not talking about forgetting where you put your car keys," said Eric J. Hall, chief executive officer of the Alzheimer's Foundation. "We're talking about forgetting what the keys are used for."

Alzheimer's disease affects more than 150,000 New Jersey residents, according to the Alzheimer's Foundation. In 2003, it accounted for more than 1,600 deaths in New Jersey. People with Alzheimer's live an average of eight years after they are diagnosed, studies show.

A simple face-to-face test with a health care professional can help determine whether someone has signs of Alzheimer's or dementia. During last year's Memory Testing Day, more than 21,000 people participated nationwide with about 2,100 of them referred to their doctors for care, Hall said.

Alzheimer's has no cure, as it is triggered by irreversible damage to brain neurons.

But stress, insufficient vitamin B-12 and depression can also contribute to memory loss, said Dr. Dipakkumar Pandya, a neurologist at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson.

Eating well, exercise, relaxation techniques and limiting one's drinking can lessen mild memory loss, said Aneesha Jean, director of Wellness Services at HomeCare Options. Several medications are also available. They do not offer a cure, Pandya said but can help someone regain the ability to eat by themselves, for example.

Spencer, the home health aide, has seen significant improvements in one 80-year-old Paterson client taking medication. "She is much more alert this week," Spencer said.

Some of Spencer's clients don't remember why they would leave bed in the morning, or what they did earlier in the day. Tests can assess such short-

MEMORY SCREENING TESTS

What do they do?

Memory screening tests are a quick way to assess if someone is having cognitive problems.

What don't they do?

The tests do not provide a diagnosis. The results are forwarded to an individual's doctor, who can follow up with a more complete assessment.

Who should take one?

People who detects memory loss in themselves or loved ones

term memory loss by asking participants to repeat words told to them several minutes earlier. While quick tests are not foolproof, they detect more than what family can do.

"People with Alzheimer's are very confident," Pandya said. "They will say everything is good. Then when you ask them what they ate that day, they can't remember."

Though Spencer is trained in caring for the elderly, even she couldn't detect her grandmother's dementia. By the time she was diagnosed, the disease had advanced rapidly. Two years later, Spencer's grandmother died.

"She would said, 'Nah, I'm fine,'" Spencer said. "She was so good at hiding it. Catching it early would have made a big difference."

What kinds of questions do they ask? Sample questions include: "Can you tell me something that happened in the news recently?" or "Please draw a circle. Now mark in all the numbers to indicate the hours of a clock."

Where can I get one? Between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. Tuesday, HomeCare Options will conduct free memory screening tests in the community room at the Paterson Museum, 2 Market St. Nurses will offer the tests in English and Spanish. For more information, call 973-523-1224.

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