

Alzheimer's hits more than memory

Memory loss. Disorientation. Night wandering. Tantrums. These have become the all-too-familiar signs of someone suffering the degenerative effects of Alzheimer's disease. Recently, however, several other characteristics have been added to the list.

According to research conducted at the University of Michigan School of Nursing, people with Alzheimer's who live at home — even those who are still relatively young and physically fit — are far more susceptible to falling than elderly people who do not have the disease. In many cases, all it takes is one serious injury from a fall to start the downward spiral toward death.

There are two large contributors to the increase in falling in the Alzheimer's population, said Dorothy Booth, assistant professor of nursing. "The cognitive impairment caused by the disease has something to do with it, but home safety may also play a critical role."

In a yearlong study, Booth and two graduate nursing students followed 11 people with Alzheimer's who were living at home with a full-time caregiver. The median age of the patients and the caregivers was 58, although some patients were as young as 59. In that year, 36 percent of the

Alzheimer's patients fell at least once, while none of the caregivers fell. One patient even fell 10 times in a month.

"These patients don't know where their body is in space," Booth said. "When you ask them to grasp an object, they may come in way below or above it. That's why pathway clutter, stairways and poorly lighted areas are particularly hazardous for them."

To protect those with Alzheimer's from dangerous tumbles, and in the process keep them living at home as long as possible, Booth urges caregivers to have a health professional skilled in this area conduct a home safety evaluation.

Often, the suggestions will be as simple as switching to a cordless phone or improving the lighting. But in other cases, pieces of furniture that emerge as obstacles may have to be removed or relocated.

"It behooves us to preserve the dignity of people afflicted with Alzheimer's by keeping them active and preventing injury," Booth said. "And safety-proofing the home is a big step caregivers can take in that direction."

A significant but sometimes overlooked reason behind the falling is that Alzheimer's creates ha-

voc with visual-spatial perception. According to Dr. Jonathan Trobe, professor of ophthalmology and associate professor of neurology at the U-M Medical Center, poor visual judgment is an early warning sign of the disease.

Common symptoms include difficulty recognizing people, interpreting pictures and distinguishing between objects, especially when their borders are obscured or overlap. For example, someone with Alzheimer's may have difficulty identifying a bottle of beer in a crowded refrigerator or a particular article of clothing in a full drawer.

Yet when such people get their eyes checked, the results are normal. This is because the vision problems associated with Alzheimer's have nothing to do with the eye itself, but with the way the brain interprets the eye's signals.

"It seems as if their problems are visual, but they aren't; they're spatial," Trobe said.

After years of research, Trobe and collaborator Charles Butter, a U-M professor of psychology, have come up with a simple screening test for the visual-spatial impairment typical of Alzheimer's, a test that may lead to earlier diagnosis of the disease.

It is a user-friendly screening

designed to help optometrists and ophthalmologists easily distinguish between a visual-spatial impairment and a merely visual one.

"Often these patients are told they are crazy, that there's nothing wrong with their eyes," Trobe said. "This test allows us to make the diagnosis early and keep them from circling around trying to figure out what the problem is."

Trobe emphasized, however, that the test itself cannot make a diagnosis of Alzheimer's. Rather, it is designed as a screening tool that tells eye-care providers when a patient should be sent for a full neurological evaluation.

Trobe's screening test, described in a recent issue of "Archives of Ophthalmology," consists of four exercises. Patients must identify a simple line drawing, a drawing embedded in a grid of lines, drawings that overlap each other, and images that are fragmented and have deleted parts.

Currently, Trobe is sending the test to selected eye-care providers around the country who will use it on their patients and report back on its effectiveness. He eventually hopes to distribute the test to optometrists and ophthalmologists nationwide.

Helpful agencies: toll-free numbers

A number of agencies and government departments offer free information or advice on a wide variety of subjects of interest and service to older adults and their families. Following is a list of toll-free numbers. Operators will be happy to answer your questions or direct you to other proper information sources.

AT&T Special Needs Center 800-233-1222
Alzheimer's & Related Disorders Center 800-621-0379
American Cancer Society 800-ACS-2345
American Council for the Blind 800-424-8666
American Diabetes Association 800-232-4372
American Parkinson's Disease Association 800-223-2732
Arthritis Foundation 800-283-7800
Auto Repairs Complaints 800-292-4204
Cancer Information Center 800-422-2337
Center for Independent Living 800-482-0222
Energy Assistance 800-292-5650

Hospice 800-331-1620
Housing Discrimination, HUD 800-424-8590
Lawyer Referral 800-968-0738
Legal Hotline for Seniors 800-347-LAWS
Medicaid Information (Social Services) 800-638-6414
Medicare Appeals 800-365-5899
Medicare Inquiry (Part B) 800-482-4045
Medicare Inquiry/Part A (Hospital) 800-872-2566
Michigan Bell Special Needs Center 800-482-8254
Nursing Home/Long Term Care 800-292-7852
Physically Impaired Association of Michigan 800-274-7426
Prescription Drug Credit (form) 800-367-6263
Social Security 800-772-1213
Taxpayers Assistance (State) 800-487-7000
Taxpayers Information (Federal) 800-829-1040
Utilities (Public Service Commission) 800-292-9555
Veterans Information and Assistance 800-482-0740

Troop 110 scouts out 2 new Eagles

Boy Scout Troop 110 of Our Lady of Sorrows in Farmington has two new Eagle Scouts.

Jason Luke, 17, is a senior at the University of Detroit High School. The Boy Scout positions he has held were assistant patrol leader, quartermaster, patrol leader and den chief.

His Eagle project involved organizing a cleanup for the new Fountain's Sport park.

Luke, whose parents are Jim and Judy Luke of Farmington, will apply to the University of Michigan and hopes to study chemical engineering.

Michael Plezia, 16, is an 11th-grader at the University of Detroit High School. Positions he has held in the troop include assistant patrol leader, senior patrol leader, scribe and instructor.

His Eagle project included building four picnic tables for the Veterans Administration Hospital in Allen Park.

Plezia, whose parents are Dorothy Plezia of Redford and Richard Plezia of Milford, will apply to the University of Florida in his senior year. He plans to study marine biology.



Jason Luke



Michael Plezia

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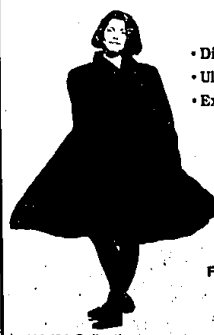
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