

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA | HEALTHCARE

Fighting for Memory

Cutting-edge clinical trials and memory screenings from the Neuropsychiatric Research Center bring volunteers and the world one step closer to making Alzheimer's disease a thing of the past.



While there is evidence that a healthy lifestyle full of social interaction, regular exercise, and cognitive engagement can help ease the development of Alzheimer's disease, there isn't a treatment on the market to prevent or treat the progressive neurodegenerative condition. At least, not yet.

"The only way that we're going to find solutions to stop, slow, or prevent Alzheimer's is through individuals volunteering in clinical trials," says Amy Schenk, community engagement lead for the Neuropsychiatric Research Center in Southwest Florida. "Getting involved in research is not only a way to give back but to receive the most innovative care."

Adds Jennifer Springer, M.D., "Volunteers are helping others and positively impacting the future of Alzheimer's disease."

Trials range from programs for people who are at a higher risk of developing Alzheimer's, such as women or people of color over the age of 55, to someone who has already received a diagnosis.

"Volunteers receive state-of-the-art clinical diagnostics and interventions at no cost in an ethical setting where it's made clear that they are the ones in the driver's seat," says Schenk. "Participants are actively engaged in the entire process, paving the way for breakthroughs in Alzheimer's research."

Snapshots of the Mind

It's uncomfortable to question whether you're developing Alzheimer's, but it's even harder to bring up the topic to a loved one after observing their cognitive behavior. Because of this, Schenk recommends an approach centered on compassion.

"No one wants to be told that there's something wrong with them, least of all from a spouse, partner, or their adult child," says Schenk. "Instead of making it about what's wrong, I encourage people to consider a memory screen just as they do with other preventive health screenings."

To maximize accessibility, Schenk visits community settings such as churches and independent living communities where people feel comfortable participating in memory screenings. During these visits, she learns their health history to help determine which factors are at play, as not all cases of cognitive impairment are indications of dementia.

"Baseline memory screenings reveal a snapshot of one's cognitive functioning at a given time," says Schenk. "The process involves unimposing paper-and-pencil tests that serve as data points to show how the mind processes information. They'll be asked to remember, draw, write, and follow directions. Once this is completed, the information is reviewed with them to help determine their options."

The purpose of these tests is similar to receiving a PSA screening to detect prostate cancer or an EKG to check for heart conditions. Changes can be measured and used to determine if the individual is a candidate for further study.

Primary investigator Wendy Bond, M.D., says, "We are dedicated to finding a cure and improving the lives of people through research and education."

"We're closer than ever to solving this complex problem and know that the answers to defeating Alzheimer's disease will come from research," Schenk concludes. "By participating, patients put us on the path to critical medical advancements."



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