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Date: 7/22/2015 10:00:26 AM
Subject: Today's News from AAIC: Women and Alzheimer's

Are Women at Greater Risk for Alzheimer's – Or Do They Just Live Longer?

Nearly two-thirds of those with Alzheimer's disease are women. Since age is the greatest risk factor for the disease, this disparity has traditionally been explained by the fact that women live longer than men. While that is still a reason – and perhaps the predominant reason – researchers are increasingly questioning whether there may be more at play in explaining the difference in the number of women and men who develop the disease.

The results of two studies released at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference (AAIC) underscore the idea that women's life expectancy may not be the only factor at work, even if they don't yet explain what those other factors may be. A study from Duke University Medical Center found that women with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) declined cognitively almost twice as fast as men with MCI. And, researchers from the University of California-San Francisco discovered the levels of amyloid plaque on the brains of women with Alzheimer's disease were the same regardless of whether the women had the APOE ϵ 4 gene that increases a person's risk of developing Alzheimer's. In contrast, brain scans of men with Alzheimer's showed a marked difference in amyloid levels based on the men's APOE ϵ 4 status.

Despite the differences in prevalence of Alzheimer's among women and men, evidence continues to mount that the incidence of dementia for both genders appears to be declining. Last year at AAIC, several studies reported such a decline in some populations (primarily Whites in Western countries). Data released at AAIC yesterday from the Einstein Aging Study in New York – which includes a significant percentage of African-American participants – adds to this body of evidence. The data show individuals who turned 65 after 1995 (those born after 1930) have a lower dementia risk than earlier cohorts.

Across these studies, speculation on why there may be declining incidence centers on increased levels of educational attainment and better cardiovascular health. The latter point, in particular, underscores the possible benefits of public health officials integrating brain health messages into existing heart health campaigns. Such messages are even more important given that many researchers are warning any declines in incidence could be reversed in the future. Diabetes and mid-life obesity increase a person's risk for cognitive decline and may also increase the risk for later-life dementia. Given the large rates of diabetes and obesity among middle-aged Americans today, it is easy to picture a scenario where dementia incidence increases as these Americans age.

About the Alzheimer's Association International Conference (AAIC)

AAIC is the world's largest conference of its kind. Each year, thousands of researchers from around the world gather to report and discuss groundbreaking research and information on the cause, diagnosis, and treatment of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Each year, the Public Health sessions at AAIC offer the opportunity to hear the latest research on Alzheimer's disease prevention, risk factors for cognitive decline, epidemiology, and early detection. For more information, visit alz.org/aaic.

The Alzheimer's Public Health E-News is supported by Cooperative Agreement #5U58DP002945-05 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the Alzheimer's Association and do not necessarily represent the official views of the CDC.

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