

when memory dims

AYURVEDA OFFERS A RAY OF HOPE TO PATIENTS

SUFFERING FROM ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

by **Ranjini Banerjee**

Aap kaun?" he asked and it broke her heart. "Nothing strange about the question, except that it was being asked by my father," says Nahiya (name changed). Her father suffers from Alzheimer's and as an effect of this disease, often forgets names and faces, even of people closest to him, like his daughter. Many others like Nahiya

have a similar story to tell about losing their loved ones to this, so far incurable disease. Now some are seeing a silver lining behind the dark cloud that seems to have engulfed their life. Ayurveda might offer a solution for which many have been searching!

One man who is dedicatedly working towards developing a cure for this disease



through ayurveda is Vaidya Harsh Sehgal. He has been practising ayurveda for the last eight years and has been in the news recently for being the youngest doctor to bring about tremendous improvement in Alzheimer's patients. He has captured the attention of national and international community of researchers for his pioneering work on Alzheimer's Disease (AD). He has travelled extensively spreading the 'efficacy with safety' of ayurveda.

Here is a look at the disease and its possible cure from multiple angles, which may serve as a guide to people who have had the misfortune of a close encounter with this disease.

What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia and is a progressive illness of the brain. When someone has dementia, their brain cells are damaged and it shortens their normal lifespan. Hippocampus is the part of the brain principally responsible for memory and it is the hardest hit in AD, though all parts of the brain are equally vulnerable.

Alzheimer's disease is not a blanket term for all cases of dementia or 'senility' but a very 'specific disease process'.

The stages of disease progression

Early stage (warning signs)

- Recent memory loss
- Difficulty in performing familiar tasks
- Language problems
- Disorientation of time and place
- Problems with abstract thinking
- Poor judgement
- Misplacing things
- Mood or behaviour change
- Loss of initiative
- Depression and aggression

Middle stage

- Very forgetful
- Extreme dependency
- Needs assistance with personal hygiene
- Wanders and may get lost sometimes
- Unprovoked aggression

Advanced stage

- Total dependence and inactivity
- Does not recognise family, friends and familiar objects
- Unable to find his or her way around the home
- Suffers bladder and bowel incontinence
- Confined to bed

Ayurveda's take on Alzheimer's

Says Vaidya Sehgal, "AD is 'jara janya smriti bhransh' (age-related degenerative disorder of the brain – the ageing process varies depending on several factors like diet, lifestyle, temperament of the body)." The root cause of a disease is the imbalance in the three humours (doshas) – vata, pitta, and kapha. The degenerative changes occurring in Alzheimer's Disease is a characteristic of vitiation of vata and specifically the prana vata (vital power). However,

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How we live is reflected in how we age and how we die. For complete and perfect health, we need to work on all the four aspects of the human body:

- Sharira (body): Vyayaam (regular exercise/yoga) to keep it fit
- Mann (mind): Mauna (silence) is a powerful tool for the 'detoxification' of the thoughts
- Mastishka (intellect) : Swadhyaya (self-study) always learning something new and educating yourself maintains the intellect throughout life
- Aatma (soul): Aadhyatma (spirituality) is the key to purify the soul – the most important facet of an individual's growth

All these four aspects when practised together persistently can prevent most diseases including Alzheimer's.

other two doshas are also involved but to a lesser degree.

Factors that may aggravate the chances of AD

- **Prakruti (temperament/genetic lineage):** Vatik temperament is prone to the disease. In addition, those with positive family history are at a significantly higher risk. Those with vata prakruti should follow vata balancing diet and lifestyle. Avoid fried, spicy, bakery products, synthetic or processed food and take light, easily digestible food. Use mustard oil/olive oil or desi ghee as cooking medium.
- **Aahar vihar (lifestyle):** Imbalanced diet, stress, pollution and malnutrition, eating at irregular timings and late nights in particular disturb vata. Avoid ice-cream, cold or iced drinks, packed fruit juices, junk food or preserved food.
- **Negative emotions:** Getting rid of negative emotions like anger, fear, frustration and tension is absolutely necessary. Bottled up, long-standing negativity explodes resulting in such serious disorders.
- **Aayu (age):** Vata increases with age. Intake of natural anti-oxidants is very beneficial.

- **Stress:** Too much of stress causes decline in physical and mental health. Yoga for fitness and de-stressing through regular daily meditation, kriya, and pranayam is necessary.

How ayurveda works

The approach is to arrest the agitated vata by using two categories of medicines. The first arrests the declining mental faculties while the second uses anti-ageing herbs. Both together restore deranged vata back to a normal, natural state.

Vaidya Sehgal proposes the following procedures:

- **Snehanapanam** (medicated ghee treatment)
- **Rasayana chikitsa** (rejuvenation)
- **Sodhana chikitsa** (elimination therapy)

He says, “The medicines used in ayurvedic system have anti-ageing effects. It tones up the functioning of the nervous system without any side-effects.” The herbs help to control the symptoms and amplify the body’s own healing process. Ayurvedic herbs are much more gentle and holistic, producing a lasting effect without any side effects.

The role of caregivers

Alzheimer’s is not just hard on the patients but probably harder on the caregivers. Providing compassionate care with immense patience is a crucial aspect of the treatment of AD, and is directly proportional to rate of improvement. Immediate family often fulfils the role of a caregiver. Parenting your parents cannot possibly be an easy task, but such role reversal is inevitable when dealing with Alzheimer’s.

Dr Sushma Chawla lost her mother to Alzheimer’s. Experiential understanding helped her launch a support group ‘Hope

Vaidya Harsh Sehgal: bringing hope to the hopeless



Ek Asha'. The organisation supports by volunteering, advising and advocating help to families that have an Alzheimer's patient.

Hope lives on

Padmini Varma Raja used to be an active and talkative person, meticulous and fond of cooking and music. Alzheimer's changed all that! She went from being a loving mother to a person who was paranoid and totally withdrawn. Soon she slipped away into the third stage of the disease. When her family had almost given up all hope, her daughter Rajalakshmi Varma discovered ayurveda. Treatment started towards the end of March 2004 and within five months, the recovery process was evident.

When asked about his secret, Vaidya Harsh Sehgal says, "Understanding of Nature. Different stages of one's lifespan, seasons, dietary and lifestyle pattern, and even different phases of the day have different effects on one's body, mind, intellect and soul. However, there is no fixed formula for treating this disease. The choice of herbs, besides several factors, depends primarily upon the pulse analysis and the body temperament of the patient. The treatment is individualised."

From his data base of 90 patients Dr Sehgal concludes that 23 per cent have reverted almost to normal, 47 per cent have shown significant improvement, 5 per cent have shown no improvement despite treatment and good care and 25 per cent have not followed treatment instructions.

The future definitely seems promising for all those suffering from Alzheimer's and brings great hope to the caregivers. It is important that we do our part in ensuring prevention, recognising the telltale signs and engaging immediate help at the earliest stage possible to provide a chance to our loved ones to lead the remaining years of their life with dignity and care.



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