

UCLA Dementia and Memory Disorders Clinic provides early diagnosis, access to clinical trials



Dementia is a broad term describing memory loss and decreased intellectual abilities that are severe enough to impact daily life. Alzheimer's is the most common type of dementia, with more than 5 million Americans living with the disease today.

The Mary S. Easton Center for Alzheimer's Disease Research at UCLA and its Dementia and Memory Disorders Clinic are committed to providing quality care for people with all types of dementia through a rigorous diagnosis protocol, an active and expanding clinical trials program and a focus on basic and translational research.

The path to diagnosis

Dementia and Memory Disorders Clinic patients typically seek evaluation when they are having difficulty finding words, remembering events or solving problems. The clinical assessment starts with an interview about the patient's symptoms and a review of their history to determine what the problem is, when it started, whether it's progressing and how it's impacting their life.

Dementia does not always mean Alzheimer's disease

While Alzheimer's disease is the leading cause of neurodegenerative dementia, clinical neurologist Sarah Kremen, MD, emphasizes that dementia has many causes. These include stroke or head trauma leading to memory problems, neurodegenerative conditions such as Parkinson's or dementia with Lewy bodies, and more benign issues such as thyroid problems, vitamin B12 deficiency, sleep apnea and depression. The Dementia and Memory Disorders Clinic works specifically with patients who have neurodegenerative disease, Kremen says, but "there are a lot of diagnoses you have to consider before jumping to Alzheimer's disease."

If after a formal evaluation a patient is diagnosed with an incurable, neurodegenerative condition, there's still great benefit to having that information, Dr. Kremen says. "We can offer patients currently approved medications, or the opportunity to enroll in a study," she says. Perhaps most importantly, "we can provide guidance and support so that they're on the right path."

The next step of the assessment is a general neurological exam, which evaluates coordination, reflexes, gait and motor function, as well as a cognitive exam. The cognitive evaluation tests patients' attention, language, visual-spatial skills, frontal executive function and memory. Some patients undergo this cognitive testing as part of their general assessment, while others are referred out for more in-depth neuropsychological testing.

Clinic physicians review existing brain scans or order new ones, looking for abnormalities such as shrunken regions of the brain or signs of stroke or tumors, which might suggest a diagnosis. In some cases, they might also look for buildup of amyloid in the brain, which can be present in people with Alzheimer's disease. They also perform blood tests to look for vitamin deficiencies or hormone irregularities that might indicate a more easily treatable cause for dementia.

Following diagnosis, the clinician works with the patient and his or her family to develop a treatment plan. Depending on the diagnosis, that might include referring the patient to additional UCLA specialists or connecting their family with additional resources within UCLA to help manage the patient's condition.

A robust clinical-trials program

UCLA is participating in a number of national clinical trials, some of which are sponsored by the National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Aging and others that are funded by industry. Ongoing trials focus on various clinical stages in the dementia trajectory, including trials involving patients who are cognitively normal but have some amyloid buildup in the brain. Others include anti-amyloid or anti-tau trials for patients who have protein buildup along with either mild or more extensive cognitive impairment due to underlying Alzheimer's disease.

The goal of these trials is to find better and earlier ways to diagnose and treat neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's.

Additional studies and research

UCLA is a member of the Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative, a prominent and long-running observational study that uses neuroimaging to better determine how Alzheimer's disease progresses. UCLA is also committed to conducting basic and translational research that might someday contribute to developing better ways of diagnosing patients, monitoring their progress and treating their disease.

The Dementia and Memory Disorders Clinic offers the most comprehensive care on the Westside of Los Angeles, with the greatest range of clinical studies available to patients.

Participating Clinicians

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