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Short Trips Can Stimulate Alzheimer's Patients

By Phyllis Staff, Ph.D.

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Severe degradation of short-term memory means that my father, an Alzheimer's elder, is seldom interested in movies or books. And, although music used to be a source of enjoyment, he no longer listens with pleasure. Left to his own devices, he sits. . .and sits. . .and sits unless he's sleeping. What to do?

We've found that visually stimulating events often perk our Alzheimer's elder right up. So we've added weekly, sometimes daily, trips, preferably four hours or less in duration, to his routine. These appear to add to his enjoyment of life and stimulate him to the extent that sometimes he'll add spontaneous comments to a conversation, a rare event nowadays.

Here are some of the outings that have added a little oomph to his life (and provided a short break from the daily grind of caregiving):

IMAX

IMAX presentations offer stunning cinematography that grabs and holds attention. The presentations are usually fairly short, about an hour in length, without a complicated story line. He enjoys the 3D effects and has remembered these films for several hours after the fact.

RIDE THE RAILS

A ride on the Dallas Area Rapid Transit rail takes less than three hours when you board at one end of the line and ride round-trip. In between, there are interesting stopovers, such as the West End, where people congregate for restaurants and entertainment. We think he enjoys watching the people as much as the museums and restaurants.

VISIT THE FARMER'S MARKET

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Talk about visual stimulation! You couldn't find a place with more going on or more interesting things to see. He loves the market, and, as a bonus, we're able to find really fresh fruits and vegetables and flowers for the garden.

COMMUNITY THEATER

From time to time, community theaters produce old favorites that he still remembers. And the Grandbury Opera produces farces that we can all enjoy together. Trips to small towns like Grandbury that have preserved their history can supply openings to reminisce.

SHOP IN THE GROCERY STORE

If you'd never visited a supermarket, imagine how exciting your first trip would be! It's probably quite similar for our Alzheimer's elder and never fails to amuse him.

VISIT A SHOPPING MALL

Bookstores no longer hold much interest for my father, but walking the mall provides lots of opportunity for people-watching. He doesn't care much for exercise these days, so a trip to the mall provides a built-in excuse for walking.

These particular jaunts might not work for your Alzheimer's elder, but they should fire up your imagination.

Phyllis Staff, Ph.D. – Phyllis Staff is an experimental psychologist and the CEO of The Best Is Yet.Net, an internet company that helps seniors and caregivers find trustworthy residential care. She is the author of *How to Find Great Senior Housing: A Roadmap for Elders and Those Who Love Them*. She is also the daughter of a victim of Alzheimer's disease. Visit the author's web site at

Alzheimer's Toxin May Be Key To Slowing Disease

By Baron Grove

Australian scientists say they have identified a toxin which plays a key role in the onset of Alzheimer's, raising hope that a drug targeting the toxin could be developed to slow the degenerative brain disease.

The toxin, called quinolinic acid, kills nerve cells in the brain, leading to dysfunction and death, the scientists said.

"Quinolinic acid may not be the cause of Alzheimer's disease, but it plays a key role in its progression," Alzheimer's researcher Dr Karen Cullen from the University of Sydney said in a statement. "It's the smoking gun, if you like."

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"While we won't be able to prevent people from getting Alzheimer's disease, we may eventually, with the use of drugs, be able to slow down the progression."

Alzheimer's is a brain–destroying disease that affects millions of people around the world. As the population gets steadily older, experts estimate numbers will balloon to as many as 16 million in the United States alone by 2015.

More than 200,000 people have Alzheimer's disease in Australia and the number is expected to rise to 730,000 by 2050.

Outward symptoms start with memory loss, which progresses to complete helplessness as brain cells are destroyed. In the brain, neurons die as messy plaques and tangles of protein form.

The Alzheimer's research team from Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital, the University of Sydney and Japan's Hokkaido University found quinolinic acid neurotoxicity in the brains of dementia patients.

Quinolinic acid is part of a biochemical pathway called the kynurenine pathway which is also found in other brain disorders, including Huntington's disease and schizophrenia.

The scientists said there were several drugs in an advanced stage of development for other conditions which targeted this pathway and that these drugs, which still need to be tested, could be used to complement other treatments for Alzheimer's.

Baron Grove

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