

Are You Wearing Out Your Memory Before 30?

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In Malaysia, there has been an increase of dementia patients especially among the young people. Pic: www.fuccha.in

It is common for some diseases to be normally associated with the elderly age group, but nowadays diseases previously thought to affect only the older generation seems to be making its appearance in younger patients.

When young people exhibit signs of severe forgetfulness, is it simply that their hyper-speed lifestyle has too much distraction crowding their memory that they cannot retrieve the information they want? Are they experiencing 'normal' forgetfulness?

Enter Dementia, a condition that commonly affects people from the age group of 65 years old and above but now is becoming prevalent among youth.

Amir (not his real name) is a young working adult who seems to have a little bit of a memory loss disorder.

"I would always forget to switch off the electrical appliances at my home and would normally leave the water tap running while doing chores," said the 26-year-old.

Amir thought it was maybe due to his exhaustion from working that caused him to forget those little things, but things her forgot are getting a little bit more serious.

"There was once I was doing some shopping at a supermarket and I thought the cashier gave me the wrong balance and immediately scolded her, without realizing I did actually receive the right amount of change – that's how quickly I would forget things," shared Amir.



Patients who are aged 65 years old and below are categorized as having 'early onset dementia'. Pic: www.malaysiaria.com.my

His friends would often make fun of his poor memory referring to it as an early sign of having memory loss as he would repeat the same conversation over and over as he would forget things as quickly as an 'old uncle'.

Amir's condition is worrying his family and friends and he is currently seeking further help with a specialist to diagnose and if necessary, treat his disorder.

Young and forgetful

According to *Alzheimer's Society UK*, there are more than 42,325 people in the UK living with young-onset dementia, which represent around 5% of the 850,000 people with dementia.

In Malaysia, there has been an increase of dementia patients especially among the young as recorded in the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital's (HKL) Daily Treatment Clinic, according to *Harian Metro* recently.

Since the clinic's launch in 2012, there are over 150 young dementia patients recorded in 2013 and has increased by 70 percent in the period of January to October this year, with a total of 250 patients recorded so far in 2014.



Consultant Neurologist Dr. Lee Moon Keen said dementia can also be caused by degenerative conditions such as Parkinson's and Huntington's diseases. Pic: www.medeguide.com

Are younger Malaysians facing a higher risk today?

Consultant Neurologist Dr. Lee Moon Keen said dementia generally refers to the impairment of cognitive functions such as memory, judgment and brain function. It is commonly caused by Alzheimer's Disease (AD), followed by vascular dementia (VaD).

Referring to Amir's condition that happens to have some sort of short-term memory loss, Lee said it is an early and persistent feature of AD and other dementias.

Patients who are aged 65 years old and below are categorized as having 'early onset dementia' that may be caused by two elements; pre-senile dementia or senile dementia with early onset. The latter is considered rare compared with late-onset, as it is more likely to be caused by uncommon conditions.

"Pre-senile dementias includes vascular dementia that is caused by an impaired supply of blood to the brain which may due to a series of small strokes,"

"It can also be caused by degenerative conditions such as Parkinson's and Huntington's diseases, other than brain infections caused by HIV and 'Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease', known as 'mad-cow disease'," she said.

High levels of chronic alcohol consumption are also linked to dementia other than head trauma due to road traffic accidents, sports accidents or violent crimes. For example, world famous boxer Sugar Ray Robinson died from AD and legendary boxer, Muhammad Ali and famous actor Michael J. Fox are battling Parkinson's disease.

"Patient as young as 29-year-old may have early onset Alzheimer's Disease, in which the brain cells are shrinking with an accumulation of abnormal amount of amyloid protein and also

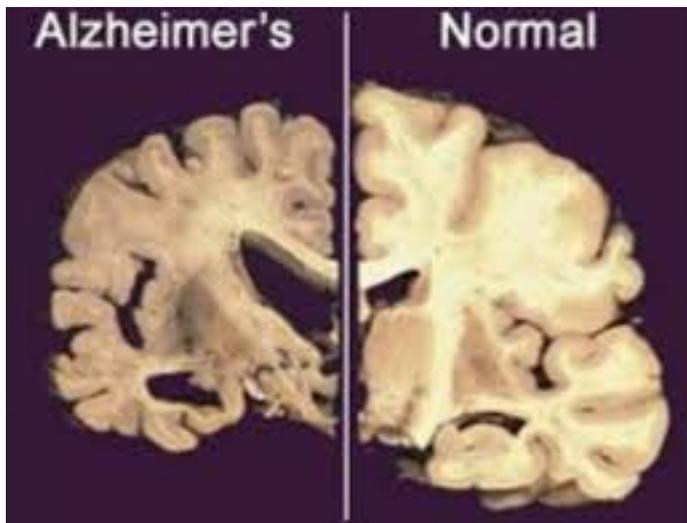
degenerative nerve fibers and the deficiency of a neurotransmitter chemical named 'acetylcholine'," explained Lee.

Lee also mentioned that AD is also caused by inherited gene abnormalities that usually run in the family, with at least three genes identified in cases of familial AD with early onset.

Furthermore, people with Down syndrome (Trisomy 21) are also at risk of developing a form of dementia that is very similar to AD, especially at a young age.

"Young people are often observed to be absent-minded and have problems to concentrate in their daily life. This is more likely due to a high level of stress and lack of proper rest,"

"Modern technology does seem to lead to shorter attention span and higher distractibility, but whether it can lead to early dementia or not, this is currently unknown," shared Lee.



Patient as young as 29-year-old may have early onset Alzheimer's Disease, in which the brain cells are shrinking said Dr. Lee. Pic: www.allaboutsensorsinc.net

Treatments and care for dementia patients

"A screening test such as Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) is utilized for the early cases that may be supplemented by brain imaging scans," said Lee on the treatments of dementia patients.

"Other treatments includes specific medications for improvement of cognitive function that uses a group of cholinergic drugs (Donepezil, Rivastigmine and Galantamine) and NMDA-Antagonist (Memantine),"

Of course, other than medication, much-needed social support for the patients and their family in the form of palliative care is important too for dementia patients. A proper institutional care facility centre is the last option for patients when they are unable to care for themselves.

In 1996, a member of the Rotary Club of Shah Alam (RCSA) Selangor, whose mother is an Alzheimer's patient, established the Alzheimer Disease Foundation of Malaysia (ADFM) that also set up the country's first Alzheimer's Daycare Centre.

ADFM's mission is to promote awareness of AD in Malaysia and to help dementia patients and their families in Malaysia. The foundation also does a lot of public education forums and talks towards the public, as well as fundraising activities to raise funds for ADFM's projects and programs.

Besides giving practical and emotional support through Alzheimer's Support Groups and the centre's helpline, they also give guidance and training to relatives, professionals as well as volunteers to get involved in the care and treatment.

Their Dementia Homecare Centre Sdn Bhd (DHCSB) started its operations in 2011 to provide assistance to family members of patients who are afflicted with AD or dementia.



This November, let's show your support to Alzheimer's disease Awareness month by wearing purple and thanking the caregiver. Pic: www.homemademedicine.com

Spreading the awareness

In 1983, US President Ronald Reagan, who also suffered and died from end stage Alzheimer's, designated the month of November as National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month and Caregivers Month. Currently there are more than 10 million people caring for loved ones with Alzheimer's according to *The Tennessean*.

There are a number of programs and events that highlight Alzheimer's disease awareness this month with the 4th International Conference on Neurology and Epidemiology (More info: <http://www.icne2014.com/en/>) scheduled to take place this 6th to 8th November 2014.

ADFM also have a number of programs and events in November with a talk program on Sleep Disorder (More info: <http://admalaysia.ning.com/>) on the 15th of November 2014 and a charity concert, 'Konsert Amal Diraja – Forget Me Not' on 5th December 2014 in conjunction with His Royal Highness the Sultan of Selangor's birthday and to raise funds for ADFM's building fund.

A study by the American Academy of Neurology in 2005 had indicated that young patients with dementia have more preventable conditions relating to head trauma, alcohol abuse and HIV so choosing a lower risk lifestyle is important. Most health practitioners also emphasize the importance of staying healthy – getting enough exercise, sleep, managing stress and eating well.

This month let's show your support to Alzheimer's disease Awareness month by wearing purple and thanking the caregiver who has been caring for your loved ones suffering from this disease.

- *mD*