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Your Brain, Your Health, Your Voice

When you visit the doctor, certain things are routine. Your blood pressure is checked, your weight is recorded, and blood tests may be ordered to monitor cholesterol, glucose levels, and other health indicators. But how often do you talk with your doctor about your brain health? If we advocate for our heart health and physical well-being, shouldn't we also advocate for our brain health?

As people age, many worry about cognitive changes that could indicate dementia. It is a difficult and often frightening topic to discuss. However, just as we monitor other aspects of our health, we should also pay attention to our cognitive health and speak up when concerns arise.

The good news is that most people experience only normal age-related memory changes. These changes are often subtle and may include slower processing speed or taking longer to recall information. They generally do not interfere with daily activities. However, some changes may signal a more serious concern. Examples include forgetting information soon after hearing it, becoming disoriented in familiar places, or having increasing difficulty managing everyday tasks.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, "Dementia is a general term for loss of memory, language, problem-solving, and other thinking abilities that are severe enough to interfere with daily life." Talking with your primary care provider sooner rather than later can help identify concerns and rule out other conditions that may affect memory or thinking abilities.

In some cases, memory and cognitive problems may be reversible. Certain medications, illnesses such as urinary tract infections, stress, depression, sleep problems, and other health conditions can affect memory and thinking. Identifying and treating these issues may improve cognitive functioning.

If you notice changes in your memory, it is important to discuss them with your doctor. One of the biggest barriers to seeking help is fear. Some people worry they may receive a diagnosis they are not ready to hear. However, if symptoms warrant further evaluation, it is better to know sooner rather than later. An accurate diagnosis allows individuals and families to plan ahead and explore available treatment options. While there is currently no cure for Alzheimer's disease, treatments and interventions may help manage symptoms and improve quality of life.

Taking charge of your brain health also means being proactive about reducing your risk of cognitive decline. Consider these strategies for maintaining a healthy brain:

- **Protect your head.** Help prevent head injuries by wearing a helmet when biking or participating in sports and by taking steps to reduce your risk of falls.
- **Don't smoke.** Avoiding tobacco use or quitting smoking may help lower your risk of cognitive decline.
- **Stay physically active.** Participate in activities that increase your heart rate, such as walking, swimming, jogging, or other forms of aerobic exercise.
- **Challenge your mind.** Learn a new skill, take up a hobby, or try new activities that stimulate your brain.
- **Control your blood pressure.** Practice healthy habits such as eating nutritious foods, staying active, and taking prescribed medications.
- **Manage diabetes.** If you have Type 2 diabetes, work with your healthcare provider to manage your condition through healthy eating, physical activity, and medication when needed.