

San Gabriel Valley Tribune: When it comes to the brain, use your head
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Unlike James Bond's martinis, brains that are shaken are not good, but they're even worse stirred.

"Let's say you take Jell-O, in a container," said Dr. Nirav Patel, a neurologist on staff at Memorial Medical Center of Long Beach since 1997. "You throw that on the ground. If you actually had a microchip inside that Jell-O, it would keep moving around, even though the outside container stops moving."

Patel was explaining why helmets are helpful in certain activities.

"It's not a cure, but at least it's better than nothing," he said in a phone interview. "Wearing a helmet, there's a chance you can reduce the amount of injury. It's called acceleration-deceleration injury.

"An example would be if you're running and you run into a pole," he said. "The pole doesn't move, so your whole body doesn't move, but your brain inside will keep moving around, and it will hit certain parts of the skull and get injured."

Another example is skiing accidents. The high-profile deaths of Natasha Richardson, Sonny Bono and Sen. Robert Kennedy's son, Michael, all have one thing in common. None of the three was wearing a helmet.

In an Associated Press story, Dr. Robert Williams, associate professor of anesthesia and pediatrics at Fletcher Allen Health Care in Burlington, Vt., said that research shows wearing a helmet while skiing decreases the likelihood of having a head injury by 40 percent to 60 percent.

"We're lucky that somebody made the skull, so the brain is protected, and there are different layers between the skull and the brain itself that protect your brain," said Patel. "But it's not enough protection from certain head injuries, especially where your head hits something and your brain rattles inside. "Sometimes the connections can get pulled and stunned, and sometimes you can actually sever nerves and get permanent brain injury."

When a brain is stunned, it's called a concussion, said Patel.

"It makes a person not able to concentrate, and they get dizzy, with blurry vision," he said. "People will fully recover from a concussion, but repeated episodes can cause some people to have what's called a post-concussive syndrome, with chronic daily headaches, dizziness and blurry vision."

He pointed out that former NFL quarterback Steve Young retired early because he had received multiple concussions and his doctors said further concussions posed too much of a risk.

"If it were me, I wouldn't play football," Patel said. He said sports such as rugby, where players don't wear helmets, are even more dangerous.

Fighting can cause even more problems than concussions.

"There's a term called dementia pugilistica, which can cause a dementia-like syndrome with Parkinson's-like symptoms. Parkinson's disease is not thought to be caused by anything other than a degenerative process of the brain that is treatable, as opposed to Parkinsonism, which is a combination of symptoms that can come from many things, such as strokes, drugs, medications - or head injuries. Most likely, Muhammad Ali's Parkinson's is related to recurrent head injury."

Head injuries also figure in Alzheimer's disease, Patel said.

"If your parents have it, you're at a high risk for getting it, but that doesn't mean you will get it," he said. "But we know that if you have genetics for Alzheimer's and have head injuries, you're at higher risk for developing it."

Alzheimer's, dementia, forgetfulness and memory loss are sometimes confused, said Patel.

"Dementia is essentially a symptom of losing cognitive function, so somebody who has mental retardation from birth and has bad memory at age 40, doesn't have dementia, because they were never normal to begin with. So it's a degenerative process where you lose function in multiple domains of your brain: language, behavior, attention and memory.

"There's Alzheimer's dementia, which is the most common, but there are also vascular dementia from strokes, Parkinson's dementia and other dementias that are not so well known. The reality is that the illnesses (causing the dementia) are completely different, the treatments are different and the prognosis is different."

Patel recommended seeing a neurologist at the first sign of dementia, so the source can be determined and treated, possibly to cure the dementia.

As for Alzheimer's, he said, "There's no cure, and if anybody says there is, they're wrong. But there's proven medicine, FDA-approved, to help slow this process down."

Patel is against writing off or institutionalizing older patients with Alzheimer's.

"Age is not a reason to not treat anybody," he said. "We're not in England, where if you're a certain age, you don't get dialysis. There's crazy medicine over there."

"It depends on what level the dementia is, but there are healthy 80-year-olds and 90-year-olds, and I just saw a 101-year-old. If that person started developing Alzheimer's, I would treat him.

"You're not stopping it, you're not curing it, but in two years you could still be home with family, as opposed to having to be in a nursing home or Alzheimer's facility, which is a huge difference in family dynamics and cost."

Memory loss is part of dementia, but forgetfulness (or senior moments), "is part of life," he said.

"I forget things my wife tells me to do when I get home," he said. "Sometimes if you're extremely busy, you will not remember everything, and that's normal. And there's something called normal memory loss with aging that's different than memory loss with Alzheimer's disease.

"The difference between forgetfulness and memory loss is when you forget something and somebody brings it to your attention, and you say, 'Oh yeah, that's right, I forgot,' it's forgetfulness. Memory loss is when you say, 'No, that never happened.'"

Dr. Nirav Patel, a neurologist on staff at Memorial Medical Center of Long Beach, offers these suggestions for the care and feeding of your brain.

Don't play football, hockey, rugby or soccer, and don't fight. Even if your head injuries don't cause brain damage, they put you at higher risk for developing Alzheimer's disease.

Always wear a helmet when bicycling, motorcycling, skiing roller-skating, or participating in similar activities.

Understand the difference between forgetfulness and memory loss. Forgetfulness, which is probably caused by the brain shrinking as you age, is when you remember something after someone reminds you.

Eat a healthy diet. Vitamin deficiency can cause memory loss.

It's OK to try food supplements, such as ginkgo biloba, as long as they don't interfere with other medical challenges you have. Check first with your physician. If taking them is deemed safe, they won't harm you and they may help with memory loss.

Check the latest research, because many studies are contradictory, and none is conclusive yet.

Intuition says puzzles and games on Wii, Nintendo and elsewhere may stimulate and help brain function, but there is no generally accepted research that supports this approach.

Dementia is not a disease, but a symptom of losing cognitive function. Most commonly, the cause is Alzheimer's, but there are many other possible causes.

At the first signs of dementia, consult a neurologist, because many causes of dementia can be treated effectively. Even if the dementia is caused by Alzheimer's, it can be treated.

There is no cure for Alzheimer's, but treatment can considerably slow its progress, allowing the patient to have a better quality of life far longer, while participating in family life and saving the costs of a care facility.

When seniors live alone, they often neglect proper nutrition, which can cause dementia. Family monitoring can help prevent this.

[Return to Top](#)