Common Medical Problems in Alzheimer's Patients
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Medical problems in patients with Alzheimer's Disease are often difficult to diagnose because of the patient's inability to communicate. Many different diseases can produce similar symptoms. Below is an outline of some common changes in conditions that might warrant an evaluation by the physician.

Abrupt Decline in Energy, Activity, Wakefulness
There are many possible causes:

1. Infection. Most common include viral (stomach or respiratory "flu"), urinary tract infections; pneumonia; skin infections. Fever is an important clue to an infection. (Remember that not all infections have fevers; and some conditions without infection will have fever.)

* Have a working thermometer and check temperature when the patient's condition is changing.

2. Heart Condition.

* Clues to possible heart conditions include:
  - chest pains
  - shortness of breath
  - swelling of the legs
  - abrupt change of blood pressure (up or down)
  - abrupt changes in pulse rate

3. Stroke or other brain injuries.
   A stroke or traumatic injury can cause abrupt changes in brain functioning as opposed to the gradual changes seen in Alzheimer's Disease.

* Clues include:
  - recent falls
  - sudden balance problems
  - difficulty speaking
  - weakness on one side of the body
  - facial droop
4. Medications.
Any recently started medications (including over the counter remedies) can be a possible cause of these changes.
* It is important to keep an up to date list of medications to review with the physician.

Gradual Decline in Energy, Activity, Wakefulness
Alzheimer's Disease produces a gradual decline in mental and physical activity over a number of years. Endocrine conditions such as diabetes and thyroid problems can develop very slowly and cause nonspecific symptoms resembling Alzheimer's Disease.

* Clues to diabetes would include:
  - increased thirst and urination
  - weight loss
  - blurred vision
  - burning sensation in the feet

* Clues to thyroid disease are often vague but might include:
  - fatigue
  - apathy
  - weight loss / weight gain
  - heart arrhythmias

Breathing Problems
Development of difficulty with breathing is usually a serious problem that requires prompt attention. Common causes include:
  - lung infections (pneumonia)
  - heart problems

Leg Swelling
* Swelling of both legs equally
  - common problem of aging
  - usually not an emergency
  - most common cause is weakness in the blood vessels that return blood to the heart from the lungs

* Swelling of the legs associated with breathing problems
  - may be an indication of a heart condition
  - requires fairly quick attention by a physician.

* Swelling of one leg only
  - often a sign of a more serious condition (i.e. a blood clot in the deep blood vessels of the leg or arms) which can be life threatening
  - must be evaluated by a physician promptly
- Blood clots can usually be detected by simple, painless test performed in most radiology offices.

**Difficulty Urinating**
* Often very uncomfortable for the patient
* May be associated with incontinence (loss of control).
* Problem can be caused by medications, but often the cause is a blockage of the urinary tract.
* Usually the patient will need prompt attention by a urologic specialist
* Blockage of flow can be gradual and not cause symptoms
  - Clue may be a new abnormality in blood tests of kidney function
  - If new abnormality in kidney function, patient should be checked for obstruction with an ultrasound, which is a simple, painless test

**Blood in the Urine**
* Can be caused by simple problem such as a urine infection
* Other causes include:
  - kidney stones (usually quite painful)
  - tumors (not painful and often not cancerous)
* Very rare to have life threatening amounts of blood in the urine - a small amount of blood can make the urine quite red and appear frightening
* Important to determine cause of bleeding to rule out the possibility of cancer

**Constipation**
* Can be a difficult problem in the elderly
* Usually problem is not life threatening, but cure can be difficult
  - Bowel habits can change with aging and often are altered by medications
  - Factors which promote regular bowel habits include
    - good fluid intake (6 to 8 - 8 oz. glasses of water daily)
    - an active lifestyle (regular exercise)
* Persistent change in bowel habits (especially with change in shape or color of stools) should prompt physician evaluation

**Blood in the stool**
* Many potential causes - most are non-cancerous
* Not unusual to loose significant amounts from the intestinal tract (more so than from the urinary tract)
* Cancers in the intestinal tract often bleed, though usually quite slowly
* Brisk bleeding episodes form the intestinal tract are most often caused by noncancerous lesions (ulcers, diverticulosis)
* Cause of bleeding can usually be determined by endoscopic examinations
Skin rashes
* Can have many causes, most of which are not serious
* Any skin rash that occurs shortly after starting a new medication should prompt a call to the physician
* Skin rashes associated with pain should be discussed with the physician
* Cellulitis (localized skin infection) is common in the elderly and usually requires antibiotics
* Shingles, or Herpes Zoster, is a skin infection caused by a virus - usually causes a painful skin eruption of small groups of red pimples on only one side of the body - usually seen in a broken line from back to front around the body - can also occur on the face - important to diagnose early as prompt treatment can prevent the development of chronic pain in the area of the rash - chronic pain from shingles occurs more commonly in older patients

Depression
* About 30% of patients with Alzheimer's Disease develop depression
* Often manifested by apathy and loss of interest in activities
* Symptoms might include excessive criticism of self and other people
* Cholinergic drugs (i.e. Aricept) can be helpful