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Five Country Poll Reveals Public Perceptions and Fears of Alzheimer's

Results of a poll of people in France, Germany, Poland, Spain and the United States show that people fear Alzheimer's disease second only to cancer and that the overwhelming majority say they would go to the doctor if they experienced symptoms of memory loss and confusion. The poll was supported by a grant to Alzheimer Europe from Bayer and was conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health.

While 89 percent of Americans say they want to know if they had Alzheimer's, the confluence of studies indicates that only 50 percent of those with the disease have been diagnosed – and some lines of evidence suggest the underdiagnosis could be as high as 80 percent.

The poll also demonstrates the lack of knowledge surrounding Alzheimer's disease. For example, many Americans mistakenly believe there is now an effective medical treatment to slow the progression of Alzheimer's, and many also think there is a reliable test currently available to determine if a person is in the early stages of the disease. A sizeable number (35 percent) do not believe that Alzheimer's disease is fatal, even though it is now the 6th leading cause of death in the United States.

These poll results demonstrate there is much more that needs to be done in educating the public about Alzheimer's disease and in encouraging early detection and diagnosis.

The Harvard School of Public Health recently conducted

Public Health Agenda



The Alzheimer's Association has identified three key elements of an Alzheimer's public health agenda: surveillance, early detection, and promotion of brain health.

The 10 Warning Signs



The Know the 10 Signs campaign is a national education effort to increase awareness of the warning signs of Alzheimer's disease and the benefits of early detection and diagnosis.

The Road Map



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Alzheimer's Association formed a partnership to examine how best to bring a public health perspective to the promotion of cognitive health. The resulting publication, *The Healthy Brain Initiative: A National Public Health Road Map to Maintaining Cognitive Health* outlines 44 priority actions to guide the public health community in

a webcast on the survey and Alzheimer's disease. To watch the webcast, click [here](#). The complete poll results can be found [here](#).

New Research on Health Care Providers and Cognitive Impairment Provides Insights to Public Health Officials

Nearly 60 percent of primary care physicians rarely or only sometimes discuss cognitive impairment with adult patients who have not been diagnosed with dementia. This from a new [study by Kristine Day, et al.](#), based on data from Porter Novelli's 2008 DocStyles survey.

When physicians do discuss cognitive impairment, the study shows they most often give advice on increasing physical activity, intellectual stimulation, a healthy diet, and social activity. Those physicians with the most experience (more than 20 years) are most likely to give advice about physical activity, a healthy diet, and limiting alcohol consumption.

A [second study](#) – led by Jan Warren-Findlow and based on focus groups with primary care physicians and mid-level health care providers (such as nurses) – found that overall, health care providers obtain information about cognitive impairment from a variety of sources, including online, from continuing medical education (CME) classes, through popular media, and based on personal experience. Physicians prefer online sources such as subscription journals with summaries, whereas mid-level providers prefer websites such as Web MD and research databases.

In the focus groups, providers mentioned that information in popular media – such as news stories and advertising – often serve as a “trigger” to for them to seek out additional information.

The results of these studies contain important take-aways for public health officials:

- Physicians need to be educated on the importance of discussing memory issues with their adult patients, particularly once patients reach the age of 65 – the age of greater risk for developing Alzheimer's disease;
- Broad messages targeted at the general population through popular media sources serve as a great catalyst for increasing knowledge and

surveillance, prevention research, communication, and policy.

Contact

For more information on the Healthy Brain Initiative, the public health agenda, or Alzheimer's disease in general, contact [Catherine Morrison](#).



- awareness among health care providers; and
- Brain health messages should be incorporated into existing physical activity and healthy eating public health campaigns, in order to complement messages that individuals may be receiving from their doctors.

Both studies were conducted by researchers in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) [Healthy Aging Research Network](#).

Iowa BRFSS Results Show Extent of Cognitive Impairment in State

In late July, the Iowa chapters of the Alzheimer's Association presented a webinar on the first results from the Cognitive Impairment module of the Iowa Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). In 2009, Iowa was one of five states to pilot the BRFSS Cognitive Impairment Module, which is designed to collect information about the impact of cognitive impairment. The webinar panelists included the state's BRFSS coordinator, Dr. Donald Shepherd, Epidemiologist Erin DeFries Bouldin, and Carol Sipfle of the Greater Iowa Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. Attendees included local public health officials from around the state, including members of the Iowa Public Health Association, and the Iowa Counties Public Health Association, as well as BRFSS coordinators from around the country.

The pilot data reveal that over six percent of Iowans have perceived cognitive impairment, interfering with activities of daily living, including housework and work as well as volunteer and social activities. Of those reporting perceived cognitive impairment, nearly 80 percent had not discussed their memory problems with a health care provider. The information can help public health officials and state policy makers increase public awareness about Alzheimer's and guide public policy decisions. For a report by the CDC on the results in Iowa and other pilot states, click [here](#).