Vascular Cognitive Impairment: What You Need to Know

Alzheimer’s disease is far from the only issue that can impact brain health as you age. Vascular cognitive impairment, or VCI is the second most common form of dementia.

VCI is sometimes referred to as vascular dementia, but Dr. Christian Camargo, a cognitive neurology specialist at the University of Miami Health System, says that vascular cognitive impairment is a more accurate term for the condition.

“Dementia has a very specific definition. It literally means that a person has lost their independence due to cognitive deficits,” he says. “However, a number of people are already developing problems related to vascular cognitive impairment that still are independent.”

What is VCI?

Vascular cognitive impairment refers to a broad range of problems related to abnormal blood flow to the brain. This can occur for a variety of reasons. For example, the gradual narrowing and hardening of arteries that lead to heart and vascular problems elsewhere in the body can also cause problems in the brain. On the other hand, VCI can occur after a stroke, though this is not always the case. Diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and other lifestyle factors can also play a role in the development of VCI.

VCI is often present with other, more familiar forms of dementia, as well. “There’s a great amount of overlap between vascular damage and Alzheimer’s disease,” says Dr. Camargo. “Research has shown that anywhere from 25 to 54 percent of people...
with dementia also show some form of vascular impairment.”

**What can you do about it?**

If you’re concerned about the possibility of VCI and how it can impact you as you age, Dr. Camargo says the best medicine in this case is prevention. For example, high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and arrhythmia all could play a significant role in VCI, so managing these factors with diet, exercise and medications is important.

“There have been some interesting studies that looked at the role of the Mediterranean diet in preventing vascular cognitive impairment,” says Dr. Camargo. “The diet included fewer processed foods and plentiful fish and extra virgin olive oil.”

All these factors are important, but Dr. Camargo is especially keen on blood pressure regulation for managing cognitive impairment over time.

“The gist of all of this is to talk to your doctor about the risk factors and form a plan to manage your risks as early as possible,” he says. “Be wary of over-the-counter supplements as the answer here, as many of them are unproven and unregulated.”

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