

To Test or Not to Test, That is the Question

By Amy Klein

■ If you could know you might be a candidate for a certain disease or condition, would you get the test?

That's the debate that's going on across all medical fields, as earlier testing becomes more readily available.

Last year, a debate began over breast cancer screening: Was it really necessary? Was it predictive? Were the percentages it helped greater than those it harmed? Many now are reexamining the guidelines for mammograms and advance screening.

A similar debate is brewing

over testing when it comes to Alzheimer's, the progressive neurological disease of the brain that leads to the irreversible loss of neurons and dementia.

Researchers just announced in August's *Archives of Neurology* that they can accurately identify patients who are on their way to developing Alzheimer's by using a spinal fluid test to detect the presence of amyloid beta, a protein fragment that forms plaques in the brain, and for tau, a protein that accumulates in the brain's dead and dying nerve cells. The test involves a spinal tap, which is commercially available. Other research also found that the disease can be identified by PET scans (not commercially available) showing amyloid plaques that are a unique feature of Alzheimer's.

The National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Alzheimer's Association are putting

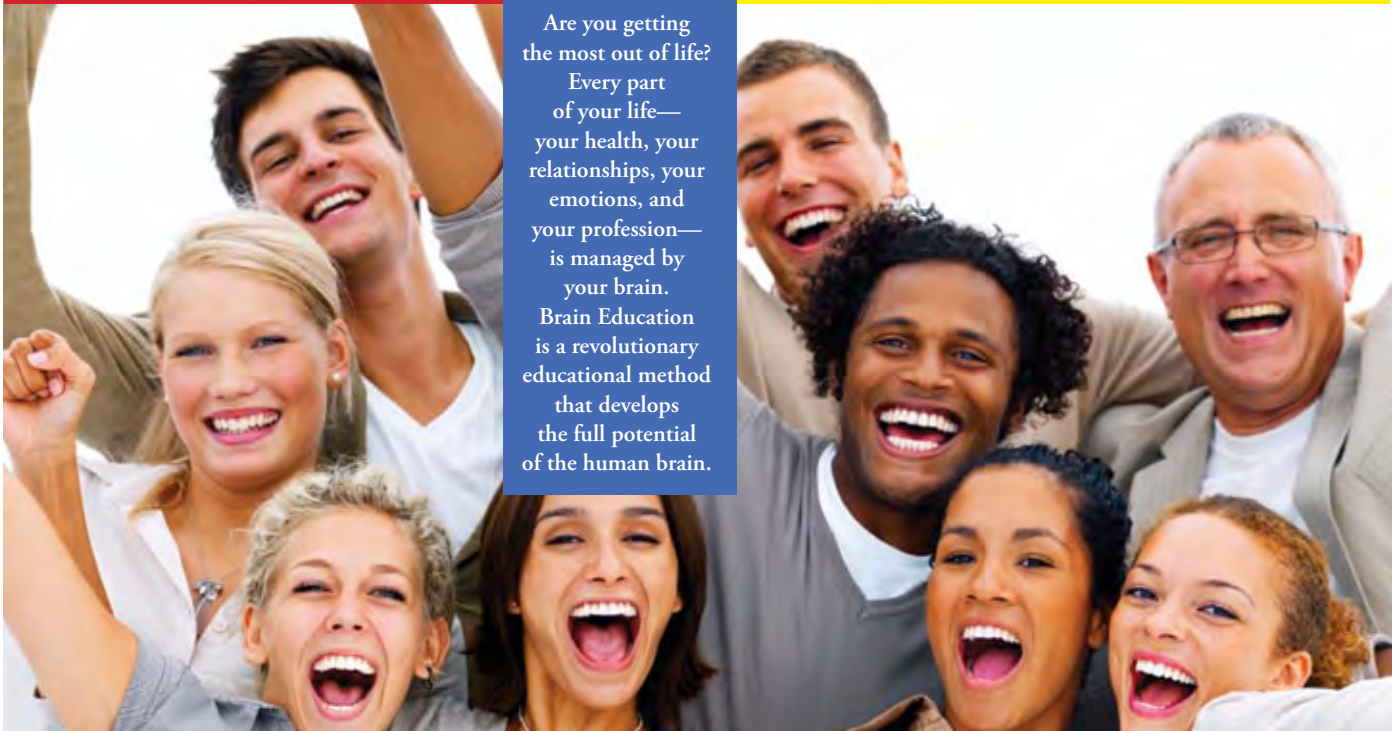


Would you test for Alzheimer's if you could?

together new diagnostic criteria "to better address the course of the disease from its very earliest stage," instead of those that were established in 1984 by the National Institute of Neurological Communicative Disorders and Stroke (NINCDS)/Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association (ADRDA) workgroup, according to "Proposed Revisions to Diagnostic Criteria for Alzheimer's Disease" (July 2010).

Some worry that testing is premature, as there is no known cure for Alzheimer's. But according to the proposal, "Alzheimer therapies are in development that may be able to slow or stop the progression of the disease." The proposal compares these therapies to early detection in heart disease. "By improving early detection and risk evaluation for Alzheimer's now, we will better be able to test potential therapies and eventually prescribe them for people most at risk." [bw]

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