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How to converse with someone who has Alzheimer's

A study showing effective and ineffective ways of conversing with Alzheimer's patients was among the research presented today at the Alzheimer's Assn. International Conference in Chicago. The meeting, which began Sunday, is a gathering of leading researchers, doctors and patient advocates working on Alzheimer's disease. Booster Shots will bring you updates from the meeting through its conclusion Wednesday.

- Among the many challenges for caregivers of Alzheimer's patients is how to stay engaged in a conversation with someone who may have trouble remembering events, expressing thoughts and following a conversation. But two studies show that caregivers can communicate effectively with patients if they avoid a few traps. UCLA researcher Jeanne Katzman studied the dinner conversations of 30 families in which one member had a recent diagnosis of Alzheimer's. She found that when the Alzheimer's patient said something that was unexpected or disrupted the normal flow of conversation, family members tended to continue their talk as if the person with Alzheimer's had not spoken -- thus taking the person with Alzheimer's out of the conversation. In other cases, family members would try to reword the comment, expand on it and bring it to a close, also eclipsing the Alzheimer's patient's contribution. The study will help researchers design programs that teach family members how to facilitate conversation and enable the patient to participate. Another study, from researchers at the University of Kansas, found that adults with Alzheimer's in nursing homes who are talked to like children are more resistant to care.
- A diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease shouldn't mean the end of physical exercise. Indeed, researchers at the University of Kansas found that people in early stages of the disease who had better fitness ratings also had less atrophy in a part of the brain linked to memory. This is the first study using MRI brain imaging to link cardiovascular fitness with specific brain changes in the hippocampus. The hippocampus is one of the first areas of the brain to suffer damage in the disease progression. "These studies reinforce the need for increased awareness and education about the importance of living a brain-healthy lifestyle, including staying physically active," said William Thies, vice president of medical and scientific research for the Alzheimer's Assn.
- On the treatment front, scientists reported on a phase-two study of a compound targeting early abnormal brain changes in a protein called tau in people with mild cognitive impairment. The compound was able to improve various measures of memory. The drug, called AL-108, is under

development by Allon Therapeutics. Another study revealed that people who took a combination of insulin and oral anti-diabetes medication had fewer Alzheimer's related brain changes. Doctors have known for years that people with diabetes have a higher risk of developing Alzheimer's disease than non-diabetics. But studies have also shown that some people with diabetes have fewer Alzheimer's-associated brain lesions than non-diabetics. Researchers think that a better understanding of insulin signaling in the brain may lead to new treatments for Alzheimer's disease.