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Alzheimer's Awareness Month

Testing helps make a diagnosis and support is there for families.

Lynn Breuer | Special to the Jewish News



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Licensed Psychologist

248-470-0231 **shoshanakatz@yahoo.com**

- Feeling stressed out or overwhelmed?
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If so, it is time to seek help. New clients are currently being accepted. Please call or email for a consultation.




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Dementia is the second most common diagnosis given to older adults — and perhaps the most difficult to accept. As November is National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month and National Caregiver Month, the time is right to address some of the most frequently asked questions we at ElderCare Solutions of Michigan at Jewish Family Service hear regarding dementia.

What exactly is dementia and how is it diagnosed?

Dementia is an umbrella category that serves as a catch-all for different types of cognitive disorders, ranging from short- or long-term memory loss to more specific diagnoses, including the most common type of dementia, Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's is caused by damage to the brain's nerve cells. According to the Alzheimer's Association, symptoms may include:

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
- Difficulty communicating
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities

- Changes in mood and personality

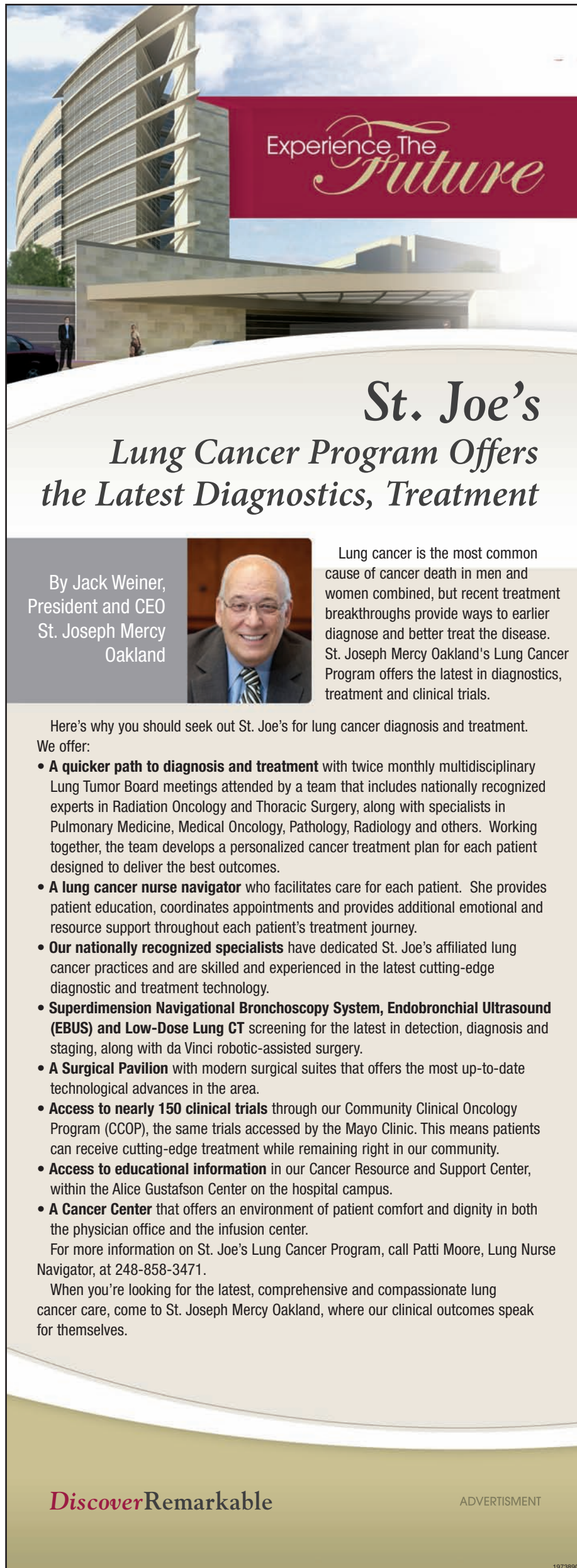
Vascular dementia is the second most common type of dementia, which occurs when clots block blood flow to parts of the brain.

Dementia diagnoses are usually made by combining someone's history and experiences with some type of testing so that objective evidence and observed functioning together form the basis for the diagnosis. MRIs or other brain scans are helpful to identify vascular dementia and rule out physical causes for cognitive difficulties, such as brain tumors.

More extensive neurological and psychological testing is available and can provide objective measures of cognitive abilities and identify specific areas of strengths as well as deficits.

Cognitive screening tools, however, are available to anyone, regardless of history of symptoms, and at a very low cost. Screening tools are designed to help people identify whether or not a more thorough evaluation is necessary, and scores are broken down into three distinct categories of normal, mild cognitive impairment (MCI) or dementia. Cognitive screening is a great place to start, but it is important to remember the results may not be conclusive. For example, if someone's score results in a determination of MCI, it would be important to follow up with more in-


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Experience The *Future*

St. Joe's Lung Cancer Program Offers the Latest Diagnostics, Treatment

By Jack Weiner, President and CEO St. Joseph Mercy Oakland



Lung cancer is the most common cause of cancer death in men and women combined, but recent treatment breakthroughs provide ways to earlier diagnose and better treat the disease. St. Joseph Mercy Oakland's Lung Cancer Program offers the latest in diagnostics, treatment and clinical trials.

Here's why you should seek out St. Joe's for lung cancer diagnosis and treatment. We offer:

- **A quicker path to diagnosis and treatment** with twice monthly multidisciplinary Lung Tumor Board meetings attended by a team that includes nationally recognized experts in Radiation Oncology and Thoracic Surgery, along with specialists in Pulmonary Medicine, Medical Oncology, Pathology, Radiology and others. Working together, the team develops a personalized cancer treatment plan for each patient designed to deliver the best outcomes.
- **A lung cancer nurse navigator** who facilitates care for each patient. She provides patient education, coordinates appointments and provides additional emotional and resource support throughout each patient's treatment journey.
- **Our nationally recognized specialists** have dedicated St. Joe's affiliated lung cancer practices and are skilled and experienced in the latest cutting-edge diagnostic and treatment technology.
- **Superdimension Navigational Bronchoscopy System, Endobronchial Ultrasound (EBUS) and Low-Dose Lung CT** screening for the latest in detection, diagnosis and staging, along with da Vinci robotic-assisted surgery.
- **A Surgical Pavilion** with modern surgical suites that offers the most up-to-date technological advances in the area.
- **Access to nearly 150 clinical trials** through our Community Clinical Oncology Program (CCOP), the same trials accessed by the Mayo Clinic. This means patients can receive cutting-edge treatment while remaining right in our community.
- **Access to educational information** in our Cancer Resource and Support Center, within the Alice Gustafson Center on the hospital campus.
- **A Cancer Center** that offers an environment of patient comfort and dignity in both the physician office and the infusion center.

For more information on St. Joe's Lung Cancer Program, call Patti Moore, Lung Nurse Navigator, at 248-858-3471.

When you're looking for the latest, comprehensive and compassionate lung cancer care, come to St. Joseph Mercy Oakland, where our clinical outcomes speak for themselves.

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depth testing. There have been many instances of people who are highly intelligent testing in the MCI range when more in-depth testing indicates Alzheimer's disease. Their intelligence allows them to compensate for their cognitive deficits on the screening tool but cannot be sustained through more extensive testing.

Why is it important to be screened or tested?

That's an individual decision. There is no cure for dementia; however, there are medications believed to slow down the progression of the disease, which helps people live with more mild to moderate forms, rather than severe. With that in mind, starting treatment as early as possible is important to help preserve cognitive functioning.

How can I tell if my memory issues are normal for someone my age or a sign of dementia?

Have you ever walked out of a parking lot and had to think for a moment because you weren't sure where you had parked your car? Or searched the house because you couldn't find your keys? Most of us have. We tend to joke about losing our memories or getting older, but the reality is that most of us lead busy lives; we don't always pay enough attention to routine tasks and occasionally have difficulty remembering where we left our keys (or car). And that's perfectly normal, especially as we age.

So how do you distinguish when your level of forgetting is no longer what would be considered normal? Generally speaking, when memory loss or confusion is severe enough to interfere with someone's ability to work and maintain a social life, it is no longer considered normal age-related cognitive changes. Instead, that's probably the time to consult a neurologist or geriatrician for a closer look.

But the fact that some of these things occasionally happen to all of us, ironically, feeds denial, both on the part of the person living with dementia and his or her family members.

I have a family member just diagnosed with dementia and I am feeling overwhelmed. What do I need to know?

As overwhelming as it can be in the beginning, it is important to understand that everyone's course of the disease is individual because different parts of the brain can be impacted by dementia. For example, short-term memory may be impaired, but judgment may still be intact. Because impacted areas differ from person to person, people with dementia can have very different functional abilities.

Unfortunately, this means that a cookie-cutter approach won't work; it's important to avoid fast forwarding to

the worst-case scenario until you have to. Someone who is diagnosed with the early stages of dementia later in life may never reach advanced stages of the disease.

It's also a good idea to plan ahead. Start by discussing with your loved one their needs, plans and wishes, including end-of-life care, advance directives, hospice and funeral arrangements. It's also a good idea to obtain Durable Power of Attorney documents if they aren't already available. Gathering telephone numbers for doctors, lawyers, financial advisers and having them all in one place, along with copies of crucial documents such as wills, insurance policies, tax returns, investments, bank accounts and medical records, can make things easier than searching frantically when the need arises.

How can I plan a family celebration to include a relative who has dementia?

A little advanced planning can make a tremendous difference when including a loved one with dementia in a family celebration. Use these suggestions:

- **Choose the time of day carefully:** Many people with Alzheimer's experience Sundowner's syndrome, meaning they become less lucid later in the day and into the evening. If this is true for your relative, brunch would be a better choice than dinner.

- **Plan activities for everyone:** Singing songs from long ago is a favorite pastime for many adults with dementia. Pop in a CD and your loved one might sing along! Or, if you've got little ones who like to paint, have everyone participate. People with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia often enjoy painting. It's like riding a bike — people never forget how. It also allows them to tap into the creative side of their brain.

- **Join in her reality:** Oftentimes people with dementia can become agitated if they're challenged, and that doesn't create a warm, celebratory feeling. So if your family member thinks she just got back from Europe, instead of trying to tell her that was a long time ago, ask what she liked best about her trip. Joining in their reality enhances your time together and provides reassurance.

- **Use bright colors for decorations:** Brighter colors are easier for older adults to see, so if you're picking up flowers or balloons, choose bright, vibrant colors. *

For more details or support, contact ElderCare Solutions of Michigan, a Jewish Family Service agency at www.eldercareofsolutionsofmi.org or (248) 592-1944; or the Alzheimer's Association at www.alz.org or its 24/7 Helpline at (800) 272-3900. Lynn Breuer, MSW, is the 24/7 team leader and marketing manager of ElderCare Solutions of Michigan.