

AND NOW A WORD FROM THE DOCTOR...

Brain Fitness is Puzzling

By David Perlmutter, MD, FACN



While most people recognize the importance of regular medical tests, such as those that monitor cholesterol, because of its role in coronary artery disease, and mammograms for early breast cancer detection, very few seem to appreciate that there's a powerful risk marker for brain degeneration that is easily evaluated. Homocysteine is an amino acid that is produced in humans as a normal part of metabolism. Elevation of homocysteine represents a significant threat to brain health.

Research appearing in the journal *Neurology* reports that an elevation of homocysteine is related both to atrophy of the brain (wasting away of vital brain tissue) as well as damage to the brain's vital blood vessel system. These factors explain why elevation of homocysteine is associated with a dramatically increased risk for Alzheimer's disease.

So why isn't homocysteine part of the typical medical examination blood profile? My guess is that there is little public awareness of homocysteine as there is no patented drug fix for this problem. Because homocysteine is lowered with specific vitamins, it's not likely you will see ads describing the importance of lowering homocysteine appearing on the evening news or in magazines. But vitamins do indeed fix the problem. "This is exciting information because homocysteine levels can be reduced by taking the vitamins B6, B12, and folic acid," said James F. Toole, MD, Professor of Neurology at Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

Dr. Toole is indeed right on the money. Homocysteine is almost always brought under control with a regimen of widely available vitamins including B6, B12 and folic acid. While consuming foods that are rich in these vitamins is not enough to counteract high levels of homocysteine, those whose diets are generally low in these nutrients put themselves at risk for elevation of homocysteine and as a consequence, increase their risk for the various medical conditions that elevation of homocysteine can cause. So while your doctor may not choose to include a homocysteine blood test with your next examination, it's a good idea to simply ask to have it included and rechecked on a yearly basis, as the important role of this test in preserving brain health is now clear. And the best part of this is that fixing the problem doesn't require a prescription, just a trip to your local drug-store or health-food store.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dail".