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National Institutes of Health panel of scientists see no proof of Alzheimer's prevention

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The New York Times

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By Gina Kolata New York Times

Bethesda, Md. -- The scene was a kind of science court. On trial was the question, "Can anything -- running on a

treadmill, eating more spinach, learning Arabic -- prevent Alzheimer's disease or delay its progression?"

To try to answer that question, the National Institutes of Health sponsored the court, appointing a jury of 15 medical scientists with no vested interests in Alzheimer's research. They would hear the evidence and reach a judgment on what the data showed.

For a day and a half last spring, researchers presented their cases, describing studies and explaining what they had hoped to show. The jury also heard from scientists from Duke University who had been commissioned to look at the body of evidence and weigh it. The studies included research on nearly everything proposed to prevent the disease. And they included research on traits that might hasten Alzheimer's onset, like not having much of an education or being a loner.

It is an issue that has taken on intense importance because scientists recently reported compelling evidence that two types of tests, PET scans of Alzheimer's plaque in the brain and tests of spinal fluid, can find signs of the disease years before people have symptoms. That gives rise to the question: What, if anything, can people do to prevent it?

But the jury's verdict was depressing and distressing.

"Currently," the panel wrote, "no evidence of even moderate scientific quality exists to support the association of any modifiable factor (such as nutritional supplements, herbal preparations, dietary factors, prescription or nonprescription drugs, social or economic factors, medical conditions, toxins or environmental exposures) with reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease."

The state of the evidence reflects in part the long time it took before researchers even realized that Alzheimer's was a disease, said Dr. Richard Hodes, director of the National Institute on Aging. Until the mid-1980s, many thought dementia was a normal part of aging, and so serious studies of its causes and prevention did not really begin until then.

In the meantime, doctors are in a bind. Should they tell people to do things like walk briskly or eat vegetables -- activities that might someday be shown to protect against Alzheimer's and that certainly cannot hurt? Or should they wait for absolute proof, confirmation that a diet or a drug or an exercise regimen prevents Alzheimer's?

The Alzheimer's Association tells people to exercise, challenge themselves mentally, remain socially engaged and keep their hearts healthy. Such measures can only help, says Dr. Maria Carrillo, a senior director of the organization.

But, she said, "the Alzheimer's Association certainly agrees that there is not enough evidence to say anything definitive about the prevention of Alzheimer's disease and any kind of intervention."

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