

## Dementia - risk reduction

Dementia cannot yet be prevented or cured, but the choices you make in midlife can help to keep your brain healthy as you age. Research shows that those who adopt a 'brain healthy' lifestyle have a reduced risk of dementia in later life.

There are some risk factors for developing dementia that you can't control – getting older and your genes. So, it is important to do what you can with the things you can control – your lifestyle and habits.

Changes in the brain that result in dementia may start decades before symptoms appear, so it is important to look after your brain throughout your life.

### Tips to help protect your brain

Researchers have found that healthy lifestyle habits may reduce decline in brain function and reduce the risk (or delay the onset) of dementia in later life.

Some things you can do to help protect your brain function include:

- Be mentally active.
- Stay physically active.
- Enjoy healthy eating.
- Manage your blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar and weight.
- Maintain an active social life.
- Avoid smoking and only drink alcohol in moderation.
- Protect your head against injury.

### Be mentally active

Research shows that people who take part in intellectually stimulating activities through education, work or leisure – for example, reading and playing board games or musical instruments – have a reduced risk of dementia.

Stimulating the brain is thought to build more and stronger brain cell connections, helping you to stay mentally sharp.

The process of learning new information enhances our memory and other brain functions. It may help delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. The earlier you start the better.

### Stay physically active

People who are physically active have a lower risk of heart disease and stroke. These conditions are both associated with an increased risk of developing dementia. The National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians recommend adults do at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days to achieve health benefits.

While the amount, frequency and type of physical activity that is needed to reduce the risk of dementia are not yet known, research indicates that aerobic activity is important. Aerobic activity includes brisk walking, cycling, dancing, jogging and gardening. To get the most health benefits from physical activity, it is recommended that you do a variety of activities and be active in as many ways as you can. Options include aerobic and weight-bearing exercise and stretching.

## Enjoy healthy eating

The link between diet and brain health is becoming increasingly recognised by health professionals. It's been known for some time that too many saturated fats can cause heart disease. Research now tells us that they can also increase the risk of Alzheimer's disease and vascular (blood vessel related) dementia.

A number of other nutritional factors including omega-3 fats, antioxidants and certain vitamins may be important for reducing dementia risk. However, further research is needed.

Based on current evidence, nutritionists recommend that you:

- Eat a variety of foods, including fruits and vegetables, to ensure adequate nutrient intake.
- Reduce your intake of saturated fats. Choose lean red meat, chicken without skin and reduced-fat dairy products. Limit butter, deep fried foods, pastries, cakes and biscuits.
- Choose unsaturated fats such as olive, canola, sunflower and safflower oils and margarine spreads.
- Consider including foods rich in omega-3 fats in your diet. Foods high in omega-3 include soy, canola and flaxseed oils, canola-based margarines and fish – especially oily varieties (Atlantic salmon, mackerel, Southern blue-fin tuna, trevally and sardines). For general health, aim for one or two meals that include fish a week.

## Have regular health checks

Research shows that people who have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, or are obese, particularly around middle age, have a greater risk of developing dementia later in life. Promisingly, studies have shown that the treatment of high blood pressure reduces that risk. Other studies indicate that treatment of high cholesterol and diabetes may also reduce the risk of developing dementia, although more research is needed in this area.

It is recommended you have regular check-ups to assess your:

- Blood pressure
- Cholesterol
- Blood sugar levels
- Weight.

Always follow the advice of your doctor.

## Maintain an active social life

Research shows that people who have regular social contact with others have a lower risk of developing dementia. Leisure activities that combine physical, mental and social activity may help to prevent or delay the onset of dementia. Maintain social connections by visiting family and friends, joining a club or group, attending community or special events and volunteering in the community.

## Avoid smoking and only drink alcohol in moderation

Smoking and drinking excessive amounts of alcohol are risk factors for a number of chronic diseases including heart disease and dementia.

If you do smoke, you should speak to your doctor about quitting. If you drink alcohol, you should drink in moderation. Moderate alcohol consumption may be protective against dementia, but there is not enough evidence to advise non-drinkers to consume alcohol.

## Protect your head against injury

Head injury, particularly severe injury (which causes unconsciousness for an extended period of time), has been shown to be a risk factor for the development of Alzheimer's disease.

Avoid head injury by wearing seat belts, using protective headgear when cycling or for high-risk activities, and taking care as a pedestrian.

## Where to get help

- Alzheimer's Australia, National Dementia Helpline Tel. 1800 100 500
- Your doctor
- Your local community health service
- Alzheimer's Australia's **Mind your Mind** website,

## Things to remember

- Dementia cannot yet be prevented or 'cured'.
- Healthy lifestyle choices throughout your life may help to reduce your risk of dementia.
- Staying physically and mentally active, eating well and avoiding smoking, excessive alcohol and head injury may all protect you from dementia later in life.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Alzheimer's Australia Victoria

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