

Reducing your risk of dementia



Public Health
England



Alzheimer's
Research
UK

The Power
to Defeat
Dementia



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This booklet is for anyone interested in reducing their risk of dementia.

The information in this leaflet does not replace any advice that you may be given by doctors or other healthcare professionals, but it may give you some helpful background information.

This leaflet was written in July 2015 and is due to be reviewed in July 2017. Please get in touch if you'd like a version with references or in a different format.

Dementia describes a group of symptoms, including memory loss, confusion, mood changes and difficulty with day-to-day tasks.

What is dementia?

There are many causes of dementia; Alzheimer's disease is the most common, but others include vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies and frontotemporal dementia. Mixed dementia can also occur, particularly Alzheimer's with vascular dementia or dementia with Lewy bodies. You can find out more about these diseases by requesting our booklet, '**All about dementia**'.



What is a risk factor?

A risk factor is something that increases your likelihood of developing a condition. Some risk factors, like age and genetics, can't be changed. There are others, including lifestyle factors such as smoking, which you could try to do something about.

This leaflet outlines some of the risk factors for dementia, including those we can and can't change, and suggests ways to maintain good brain health.

Risk factors for dementia

The biggest risk factor for dementia is age – the older you are the more likely you are to develop the condition, but it is not an inevitable part of ageing.



Aged 65 to 69

Aged 85 to 89

About two in 100 people aged 65 to 69 years have dementia, and this figure rises to one in five for those aged 85 to 89.

The diseases that lead to dementia are complex, and there is still a lot to learn about the risk factors. In most cases, it is likely that our age, genes, medical history and lifestyle all contribute to our risk of the condition.

Does dementia run in the family?

As dementia is so common, many of us will have a relative living with the condition – but this does not mean we will develop it too.

If you have a parent or grandparent with Alzheimer's disease, then your risk may be slightly higher than someone with no family history. However, except in rare cases, the genes we

inherit from our parents may only have a small effect on our risk of developing dementia.

In these rare cases, someone may inherit a faulty gene that causes a specific form of dementia. Some rare forms of early-onset Alzheimer's disease and frontotemporal dementia are caused by faulty genes and can run in families; symptoms of these often start in the 30s, 40s or 50s.

To find out more about the rare, inherited forms of dementia you can speak to your doctor or contact us for further information.



Can I reduce my risk of dementia?

We can't change our age or our genes and there is currently no way we can completely prevent dementia. However, there may be some simple things we can all do that might help lower our risk.

Risk factors for cardiovascular disease (like heart disease and stroke) are also risk factors for dementia. Leading a healthy lifestyle and taking regular exercise will help lower your risk of cardiovascular diseases, and it's likely you could be lowering your risk of dementia too, particularly vascular dementia.

For good heart health:



don't smoke



only drink alcohol within NHS guidelines



keep active and exercise regularly



keep cholesterol and blood pressure at a healthy level.



maintain a healthy weight



eat a healthy balanced diet

Studies suggest it may be particularly important to maintain a healthy lifestyle in your forties and fifties to help lower the risk of dementia.



Smoking and dementia

There are many good health reasons to stop smoking as it's linked to multiple medical conditions including cancer, heart disease, stroke and more. There is also evidence that smoking can increase your risk of dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease. There are trained advisors who can provide information and medication to help you to stop smoking. The **NHS Smokefree Helpline** is free to call on **0300 123 1044** or talk to your GP for advice.

It's never too late to stop smoking and kicking the habit greatly improves your chances of enjoying a disease-free, healthy old age. People who quit aged 60 can add three years to their life.

The eatwell plate

Use the eatwell plate to help you get the balance right. It shows how much of what you eat should come from each food group.



Public Health England in association with the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland

Try to choose options that are lower in salt, saturated fats and added sugars.

Foods like sausages and other processed meats, butter and cakes are high in saturated fat. This can raise cholesterol levels and cause excess weight gain, increasing the risk of heart disease and other health problems linked to dementia. Eating too much sugar can also lead to weight gain and increase the risk of type 2 diabetes. Sugary snacks such as sweets, chocolate, cakes and fizzy drinks should be eaten less often and in small amounts.

Some fat in our diet is important, particularly unsaturated fat found in oily fish, nuts, seeds and avocados. Oily fish, like salmon and sardines, contains omega-3 fatty acids. While these are an important part of our diet, current evidence does not support the use of omega-3 or other food supplements to prevent a decline in memory and thinking skills.

Older people may have a smaller appetite and eat less. It may be harder to maintain a balanced diet with enough important vitamins and minerals. Contact your GP surgery if you need advice about healthy eating.

Drinking alcohol

Studies investigating whether alcohol consumption is linked to dementia risk have had mixed results and research is ongoing. However, very heavy drinking is known to cause alcohol-related dementia, also known as Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome.

The best advice at the moment is to follow NHS lower-risk guidelines. This means not regularly drinking more than 14 units a week for both men and women. People who drink as much as this should spread their drinking over three or more days. A good way to reduce alcohol intake is to have several alcohol-free days a week.

1 unit



Half a pint (almost 300ml) of normal strength beer, cider or lager (for example, 3.5% ABV)

1.5 units



A small (125ml) glass of wine (12% ABV)

1 unit



A pub measure (25ml) of spirits

Find out more on the **NHS change4life** website.



Keeping physically active

Regular physical activity can have many health benefits, including the prevention and management of over 20 chronic conditions, reducing stress and improving mental wellbeing. It can also help you maintain a healthy weight, reducing your risk of type 2 diabetes and other conditions. While research is underway to investigate a direct effect of exercise on dementia risk, medical conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes are known risk factors

for dementia (see page 16). Therefore staying active may not only help maintain a healthy body but could have knock-on benefits for brain health too.

Being active needn't mean going to the gym or pounding the streets. You are more likely to stick with it if you find activities that you enjoy. There might be activities you can take part in with other people, like walking, dancing or cycling. Keeping active with others is a good way to encourage each other and make it a social occasion.

There are many ways to build physical activity into your weekly routine. Just getting off the bus a stop or two earlier than usual could help you do more walking. It's also important to avoid spending long periods sitting down, so try to get up and move around regularly. Any activity is better than none!

What counts, and how much?

Each week, aim for at least 150 minutes of activity at a time can count towards your total, but if you examples below, even better.



30 mins



Moderate-intensity activity

x 5

per week

or



15 mins



High-intensity activity

x 5

per week

Older people should aim to be active every day and minimise sitting for extended periods. Try to do activities that improve balance and coordination, like walking, bowls or yoga, at least twice a week.

You can find lots of ideas and information on the **NHS Choices** website, or ask your GP for advice about becoming more active.

in total. As little as 10 minutes of activity can manage longer periods, as shown in the



Mental activity and wellbeing

Several studies have suggested a link between mentally-stimulating leisure activities and a lower risk of dementia. Other studies have linked spending more time in education with a lower risk and research is ongoing in these areas. It's not clear which types of activity may be most beneficial but it's a good idea to do things you enjoy.

Keeping mentally active by learning new skills or joining clubs can also be a good way to connect with other people and improve mental wellbeing, helping you to feel happier and more positive in life.

Other diseases and medical conditions

There is evidence that the following conditions can increase the risk of dementia:

Parkinson's disease

stroke

type 2 diabetes

high blood pressure

depression

Down's syndrome

mild cognitive impairment (MCI) - early memory and thinking problems considered worse than those associated with normal ageing.

Each year, 5-10% of people who receive a diagnosis of MCI in the clinic or in research studies go on to develop dementia. However some people with MCI find their memory problems do not get worse while others find their memory returns to normal.

For advice on these conditions, you can talk to your doctor or contact us for a list of organisations and support groups that can help.



Head injuries and dementia

Some studies have suggested that a serious head injury or trauma could increase the risk of developing dementia, while others have not found this link. There is a specific form of dementia associated with damage from repeated head traumas, called dementia pugilistica. This condition is believed to affect around 20% of retired professional boxers. Outside the boxing ring, the term chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) is used to describe long-term neurological side-effects of repeated head injuries sustained in any context. Several contact sports' governing bodies are now undertaking research in this area, and have introduced new safety measures in recent years.



Alzheimer's Research UK has funded over £7.5 million of pioneering research into the prevention of dementia.

We are also launching a Prevention Fund to answer the biggest questions in prevention, seed-funding the best ideas. We're the charity leading the way in dementia research and we will not rest until people are free from the fear, harm and heartbreak of dementia.

We passionately believe that dementia can only be defeated through research. Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, and by working with the best scientists in the world, we will continue to support pioneering studies into risk reduction.



Find out more

If you have questions about dementia research or want to find out more about how to get involved in research, contact our **Dementia Research Infoline** on **0300 111 5 111** or email **infoline@alzheimersresearchuk.org**

The Infoline operates 9.00-5.00pm Monday to Friday. Calls cost no more than national rate calls to 01 or 02 numbers and should be included in any free call packages.

Top tips for a healthy lifestyle:



don't smoke



control high
blood pressure



control blood
glucose level if you
have diabetes



keep cholesterol
at a healthy
level



only drink
alcohol within
NHS guidelines



eat a healthy
balanced diet



maintain a
healthy weight



keep physically
and mentally
active



take time for
your mental
wellbeing



**The Power
to Defeat
Dementia**

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Freeport Plus RTSJ-ZCSB-RGCK
Alzheimer's Research UK
The Boulevard
Orbital park
Ashford
TN24 0GA

Send me more information

For free information, simply complete this slip. You can drop it straight in a post box or put it in an envelope labelled with the freepost address overleaf. Alternatively, phone us on **0300 111 5555**.

I would like to know more about

Dementia: symptoms and diagnosis

Caring for someone with dementia:
organisations that can help

Genes and dementia

The latest dementia research

Name

Address

We'd really like to keep you updated with the latest research developments, how your support is making a difference, and fundraising activities that you can get involved in. Your details are always held securely, but if you'd rather not hear from us please tick the relevant box:

No information by post No information by phone

If you're happy for us to contact you by email, please enter your email address here:

If you're happy for us to contact you by SMS, please enter your mobile number here:

We are the UK's leading research charity aiming to defeat dementia.

We welcome your comments to help us produce the best information for you. You can let us know what you think about this booklet by contacting us using the details below.



Contact us

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Supporter care

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Dementia Research Infoline

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