Dementia: Reducing your risk

alzheimers.org.uk
Dementia: Reducing your risk

This booklet tells you about dementia and its different risk factors – the things that increase a person’s chance of developing dementia.

You may not have realised that you can reduce your risk of dementia. Although there are some risk factors you can’t change, there are lots that you can.

There’s no way to guarantee that you won’t get dementia, but by taking the steps suggested in this booklet you can make it less likely.

If you’re in your 40s, 50s or 60s, reading this booklet is a great place to start. However the suggestions are useful for anyone looking to find out what causes dementia and the small changes you can make to help prevent it.
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What is dementia?
The word ‘dementia’ describes a group of symptoms that may include memory loss and difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language. Dementia often also involves changes in mood, perception or behaviour.

These changes are usually small to start with, but for someone with dementia they have become bad enough to affect daily life.

Dementia is a progressive and life-limiting condition. This means a person’s symptoms get worse over time, and the condition will shorten their life.

Dementia isn’t a natural part of ageing. All types of dementia are caused by diseases that affect the brain.
Types of dementia
There are many different types of dementia. Around 95% of people with a diagnosis will have one of the four main types, each of which has its own common symptoms:

- **Alzheimer’s disease** develops when clumps of protein called ‘plaques’ and ‘tangles’ form in the brain and eventually cause brain cells to die.

- **Vascular dementia** is the result of problems with the blood supply to the brain. Brain cells become starved of oxygen and eventually die.

- **Dementia with Lewy bodies (DLB)** occurs when tiny clumps of protein called Lewy bodies develop inside brain cells and cause them to die.

- **Frontotemporal dementia (FTD)** is caused by damage to areas of the brain called the frontal and temporal lobes. Clumps of abnormal proteins collect within brain cells in these lobes and cause the cells to die.

Some people have more than one type of dementia. This is called mixed dementia.

Most of the information in this booklet is about risk factors for Alzheimer’s disease, vascular dementia, or the most common form of mixed dementia (Alzheimer’s disease with vascular dementia).

For more information about all aspects of dementia including symptoms visit alzheimers.org.uk
Understanding your risk
Dementia: Reducing your risk
There are many risk factors for dementia. The risk of developing the condition depends on a mixture of these and varies from person to person.

Some of these are factors you can’t change, such as age. But there are lots of factors that can be changed. These are mainly ways of keeping your body and mind healthy.

Keeping your body fit and well, especially your heart and blood system, helps to prevent conditions like stroke, heart disease and type 2 diabetes. A person with any of these conditions has a much higher chance of developing dementia.
Understanding your risk

Mid-life – from your 40s into your early 60s – is a good time to start taking steps to reduce your risk of developing dementia. Having high blood pressure or high cholesterol or being obese at this age are all factors linked to a risk of developing dementia later in life. This is because in many cases these conditions can cause stroke, heart disease or type 2 diabetes.

The brain changes that cause dementia can start years or even decades before symptoms develop. If you live a healthy lifestyle now, you are reducing the chances that these brain changes will happen.

Mid-life may also be a time of changes. You might have children who have grown up and moved out of home, or you might find getting older is affecting the things you want and are able to do. Many people find this helps them feel motivated to start taking better care of themselves.

As a general rule, what’s good for the heart is good for the head.
Risk factors you can’t change
Some risk factors for dementia can’t be changed. The most important are a person’s age, genes, sex and ethnic origin.

**Age**

Age is the strongest risk factor for dementia. Over the age of 65, a person’s risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease or vascular dementia doubles roughly every five years. It is estimated that dementia affects one in 14 people over 65 and one in six people over 80.

However, around one in 20 people living with dementia developed it before the age of 65. This is known as ‘young-onset dementia’.

**Genes**

Genes determine how characteristics are passed down through families. There are more than 20 genes known to increase a person’s risk of developing dementia. There are also a few genes that directly cause dementia, but these are very rare.

Some people worry about their family history but there is no genetic test for Alzheimer’s disease in people over 65 that you can take through the NHS.
Sex
Women are more likely to develop Alzheimer’s disease than men (even allowing for the fact that women on average live longer). Men are at slightly higher risk of vascular dementia. For most other forms of dementia, women and men have much the same risk.

Ethnic origin
There is some evidence that people from certain ethnic communities are at higher risk of dementia than others. For example, South Asian people (from countries such as India and Pakistan) seem to develop dementia – particularly vascular dementia – more often than white Europeans.

For more information see factsheet 450, Risk factors for dementia.
Risk factors you can change
There are still lots of things you can do to reduce your risk of developing dementia. There is good evidence that doing the following six things will help.

1. Be physically active
2. Eat healthily
3. Don’t smoke
4. Drink less alcohol
5. Exercise your mind
6. Take control of your health
Be physically active
Getting regular physical exercise is one of the best ways to reduce your risk of dementia. It’s good for your heart, circulation, weight and mental wellbeing.

You might find it difficult to start exercising, or worry it means doing an activity you don’t enjoy. It’s important to find a way of exercising that works for you.

Try to do a combination of aerobic activities that get you moving, and resistance activities that require strength and work your muscles. Here are some examples:

**Aerobic activities**
- brisk walking
- hiking
- riding a bike
- tennis
- pushing a lawnmower
- Zumba.

**Resistance activities**
- heavy gardening (such as digging and shovelling)
- lifting weights
- exercises that use your body weight (such as push-ups and sit-ups).

**Activities that are both aerobic and resistance**
- circuit training
- running
- netball
- hockey
- football.
You should aim for a certain amount of aerobic exercise (in addition to resistance activities on at least two days each week). There are different options for getting the exercise you need:

**How much exercise?**

**Option 1**
150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity per week. (This will make you breathe faster and feel warmer – you’ll be able to talk but shouldn’t be able to sing the words to a song.)

- brisk walking
- riding a bike on level ground
- water aerobics
- doubles tennis
- pushing a lawnmower

**Option 2**
75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity per week. (This should make you breathe hard and fast, so you won’t be able to say more than a few words without pausing for breath.)

- jogging or running
- fast swimming
- riding a bike fast or up a hill
- singles tennis

**Option 3**
A mix of moderate and vigorous aerobic activity per week (for example, 30 minutes of vigorous activity and 90 minutes of moderate activity.)

- a combination of examples from Option 1 and Option 2.
Tips for keeping active

- Choose an activity you’ll enjoy – this makes it more likely you’ll stick to it.

- Try using a wearable gadget (such as a wristband fitness tracker) or smartphone app to track how active you’ve been. Set yourself a target and try to stick to it. A good target for many people is to aim to walk 10,000 steps per day.

- You might find a workout video helpful, such as the videos on the NHS Choices website (see ‘Other useful organisations’).

- If you enjoy activities like tai chi and yoga, keep doing them. They’re good for balance and staying flexible, and may prevent you from falling. There is some evidence that tai chi may reduce your dementia risk but more research is needed to prove this.
2

Eat healthily
Eating a healthy, balanced diet will probably reduce your risk of dementia, as well as other conditions including cancer, type 2 diabetes, obesity, stroke and heart disease.

A balanced diet
To make sure you’re eating a balanced diet, follow the guidelines here and on the next page.

Eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
They’re a good source of vitamins and minerals and can also help reduce your risk of stroke and cancer.

Eat fish at least twice a week
Oily fish like sardines, mackerel and salmon are a good source of healthy omega-3 fatty acids. They’re also a good source of protein, along with eggs and beans.

See sugar as a treat
Too much sugar is linked to weight gain and type 2 diabetes. Limit sugary treats like fizzy drinks and sweets. Check labels as some foods have more sugar than you think.

Look out for hidden salt
Too much salt increases blood pressure and the risk of developing dementia. Check labels to see how much salt is in your food. Watch out for salt in food like bread, pizza and ready meals.
Eat starchy foods like bread, potatoes and pasta
Try to base meals around these.

Eat less saturated fat
Too much saturated fat puts you at risk of stroke and heart disease. Cut back on pies, cakes and biscuits, sausages, fatty bacon and most cheeses.

Drink 6–8 glasses of fluid a day
This can include water, low-fat milk and sugar-free drinks like tea and coffee.

A ‘Mediterranean’ diet may reduce your risk of dementia. It’s made up of:
- lots of fruit and vegetables
- lots of cereals (found in foods such as bread and pasta)
- olive oil as the main fat
- some fish, poultry, eggs and dairy
- only a little red meat.
3

Don’t smoke
If you smoke, you’re putting yourself at much higher risk of developing dementia later in life.

You’re also increasing your risk of other conditions including type 2 diabetes, stroke, and lung and other cancers. Smoking does a lot of harm to the circulation of blood around the body, including the blood vessels in the brain, as well as the heart and lungs.

Tips for stopping smoking

- Talk to your GP or pharmacist about different ways to stop smoking.

- Try using a date or event as motivation for stopping. For example, you could make it a new year’s resolution, or give up during October as part of the ‘Stoptober’ campaign.

- Consider using a less harmful alternative nicotine-containing product such as e-cigarettes, lozenges or gum.

- Try using NHS Smokefree support services, which include a helpline, app and local support services (see ‘Other useful organisations’).
Drink less alcohol
Risk factors you can change

Drinking too much alcohol increases your risk of developing dementia.

You should aim to drink no more than 14 units each week (at most). If you regularly drink much more than this, you’re at risk of alcohol-related brain damage.

If you drink as many as 14 units in a week, try to spread them out over at least three days. The next page shows you how many units are in common alcoholic drinks.

Tips for cutting down on alcohol

- Set yourself a limit and keep track of how much you’re drinking.
- Try low-alcohol or alcohol-free drinks.
- Try to alternate between alcoholic and soft drinks.
- Take advantage of particular dates and events to motivate you. For example, you could make a new year’s resolution to drink less.
How many units are in your drink?
These are based on typical alcohol by volume (ABV) content. However, this does vary. If you’re buying a bottle or can, it’s helpful to check the ABV content on the label.

- **Small glass of wine (125ml)**: 1.5 units (ABV 12%)
- **Large glass of wine (250ml)**: 3 units (ABV 12%)
- **Can or pint of beer, lager or cider**: 2 units (ABV 4%)
- **Pint of higher-strength beer, lager or cider**: 3 units (ABV 5.2%)
- **Shot (25ml) of spirits like gin, vodka, rum**: 1 unit (ABV 40%)
5

Exercise your mind
Risk factors you can change

**Keeping your mind active is likely to reduce your risk of dementia. Regularly challenging yourself mentally seems to build up the brain’s ability to cope with disease.**

Find something you like doing that challenges your brain and do it regularly. It’s important to find something that you'll keep up. For example:

- studying for a qualification or course, or just for fun
- learning a new language
- doing puzzles, crosswords or quizzes
- playing card games or board games
- reading challenging books
- writing (fiction or non-fiction).

If you have a smartphone or tablet there are lots of apps that can help with these activities. You can download apps from the internet via a ‘store’ such as the App Store or Google Play.

Some people like to do electronic ‘brain training’ games. There’s definitely no harm in doing these, but there isn’t enough evidence to say they reduce your risk of dementia. However, research is ongoing.
Be social

Talking and communicating with other people may also help to reduce your risk of dementia. Try to make effort to keep in touch with the people who are important to you, such as friends and family.

Volunteering, or joining a club or community group are also good ways to stay socially active. Alzheimer’s Society has a number of opportunities for volunteering, including our Side by Side service.

For more information visit alzheimers.org.uk/volunteer

One way to think about it is ‘Use it or lose it’.
6 Take control of your health
Risk factors you can change

Looking after your health will reduce your chances of developing dementia. There are lots of ways you can do this.

Start by going for your free NHS health check if your GP invites you. This check is available to anyone aged 40–74 and living in England. It is designed to identify any early signs of dementia, as well as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, heart or kidney disease, and stroke. It’s important to go to this if you’re invited – it’s like an MOT for the body. It might give you the plan you need to make changes.

In Wales, people are encouraged to use the free online health and wellbeing check. In Northern Ireland you can book a Well Check via Northern Ireland Chest, Heart and Stroke (NICHS). For more information see ‘Other useful organisations’ on page 38.

Mid-life is an important time to start taking care of your health, if you’re not doing so already.
Other tips for looking after your health

**Seek help for depression** – depression is a likely risk factor for dementia. If you feel you might be getting depressed, seek help early. If you often feel low, anxious or irritable, talk to your GP.

**Get a good night’s sleep** – sleep is important for your mental wellbeing and it may reduce your risk of dementia. A good night’s sleep for many people is around eight hours.

**Get a hearing check** – hearing loss is a possible risk factor for dementia. Many people have some hearing loss as they age. If you’re concerned about your hearing, speak to your GP about a hearing test. This will show up any issues, which you can then look at ways of managing. Often, managing hearing loss works best when you start doing it early on.
Risk factors in the media

You may read stories in the media claiming that other things can reduce the risk of dementia, or even prevent it. It’s important to be cautious—don’t automatically believe the claims you read.

The information and advice in this booklet is based on lots of evidence. Claims in the media may not be supported by evidence in the same way.

If you’d like to know more about the evidence behind other claims of risk factors, visit alzheimers.org.uk/riskfactors or the NHS Choices website (see ‘Other useful organisations’).

What next?

As you’ll have read in this booklet, there are some risk factors like age and genetics that you can’t change. However, for the ones you can, it’s important to take control of your health and lifestyle.

By making some of these changes, you’ll reduce your chances of developing dementia and a number of other conditions.

If you’d like to know more about dementia visit alzheimers.org.uk
Other useful organisations

**Add to Your Life (Wales)**
https://addtoyourlife.wales.nhs.uk

Free NHS Wales health check to help you live longer, feel better, and stay healthy and active.

**Alcohol Concern**
www.alcoholconcern.org.uk
contact@alcoholconcern.org.uk
020 3907 8480

National charity working to reduce alcohol harm in the UK.

**Blood Pressure UK**
www.bloodpressureuk.org
help@bloodpressureuk.org
020 7882 6218 (helpline)

UK charity dedicated to lowering the nation’s blood pressure to prevent disability and death from stroke and heart disease. Provides information and support for individuals and healthcare professionals, and runs awareness-raising activities.
**British Heart Foundation**  
www.bhf.org.uk  
hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk  
0300 330 3311 (Heart Helpline, open weekdays 9am–5pm)

National heart charity that invests in research, supports and cares for heart patients, and provides information to help people reduce their risk of dying prematurely from a heart or circulatory illness.

**NHS Choices**  
www.nhs.uk  
www.nhs.uk/news (includes the science behind news headlines)  
www.nhs.uk/smokefree (NHS Smokefree service)

The official website of the National Health Service in England.

**One You**  
www.nhs.uk/oneyou

Campaign by Public Health England (PHE) to help adults across the country avoid future diseases caused by modern day life. Includes a quiz on your own lifestyle and resources.

**University of the Third Age (U3a)**  
www.u3a.org.uk  
020 8466 6139

Provides retired and semi-retired people opportunities for learning.
Volunteering Matters
www.volunteeringmatters.org.uk
020 3780 5870

Volunteering charity that engages volunteers through various programmes.

Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke (NICHS)
www.nichs.org.uk/wellcheck

One-off health checks for people who want to receive a snapshot of their overall staff health and wellbeing.
Alzheimer’s Society is the UK’s leading dementia charity. We provide information and support, improve care, fund research, and create lasting change for people affected by dementia.

If you have any concerns about Alzheimer’s disease or any other form of dementia, visit alzheimers.org.uk or call the Alzheimer’s Society National Dementia Helpline on 0300 222 1122. (Interpreters are available in any language. Calls may be recorded or monitored for training and evaluation purposes.)