



Retirement Today
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Can we prevent dementia?

We are constantly made aware of the preventative effects of having a healthy lifestyle, but what have scientists come up with to prevent dementia?

We all know people who 'do everything right' – they jog, they eat healthy food, they have had intellectually challenging jobs, and they've made the most of every moment of their lives – but sadly, have still developed dementia.

So far, researchers have found that the biggest risk factors for dementia are getting older and our genes – two things we can't do anything about. However, research also shows that people who adopt 'healthy brain' lifestyles have a reduced risk of developing dementia. A 'healthy brain' lifestyle is one where we exercise our brain and body, have a good diet and regular health checks, and remain socially active.

The last 20 years' research on what keeps our brain healthy shows that we have to "use it or lose it". We exercise our brain when we use language (reading, writing, or emailing) and play games (crosswords, Sudoku, or cards) as well as engaging in activities that engage and stimulate our hearts and minds (plays, concerts, or museums).

Researchers in the United States Institute of Ageing have found that the risk of developing Alzheimers was 47 per cent lower for those who did these activities most frequently, compared to those who did them least frequently.

The benefits of physical exercise are now widely promoted to reduce the risk of developing heart disease, stroke and diabetes. However, it is less widely known that these conditions are associated with an increased risk of developing vascular dementia.

Recent research suggests exercising even 15 minutes a day three times a week is associated with a 32% delay in the onset of dementia. Aerobic exercises like walking, swimming or dancing assist fitness, but as we age it is also good to engage in exercises to improve balance, since this helps us do everything from stand on one leg while we put a shoe on, to assisting us to prevent falls.

As a recent article in 50+ pointed out "a healthy diet is one of the best defences against illness and feeling better every day". Food that is good for the body is also good for the brain. Older people need just as much nutrition as younger people. Since we often eat less

food, we need to ensure what is eaten is high in nutrition and eat more of some food groups such as protein. Remember to drink enough water too, since dehydration can make our brain confused.

Having regular health checks and following medical advice is important for both general health and brain health. There is a higher incidence of Alzheimers among those with uncontrolled high blood pressure. High cholesterol levels contribute to the risk of stroke-related dementia and those who have high cholesterol from middle age onward have a four to five times higher risk of developing Alzheimers.

More recently in the news are the results of research on the importance of being socially active to maintain a healthy brain. Researchers have found that good social networks offer protection against showing the signs of dementia - even when a brain had the tangles and plaques indicative of Alzheimer's disease! So keep in touch with friends and family, and take part in social, cultural and other groups, or become a volunteer. Radio talkbacks or chat rooms are one way to be active, or you may prefer chatting with your neighbours and those you meet when out.

To sum up, even though we cannot prevent dementia, there is still a lot we can do to reduce our risk of developing it.
