

Reduce your risk of dementia

Dementia is an illness that affects the brain and kills off brain cells one by one. Find out how to reduce your risk of dementia by doing things that are good for you and your brain.

Introduction

Early symptoms of the illness are memory loss and confusion, and eventually it leads to a complete loss of cognitive functioning, where the person with dementia relies on care 24 hours a day. There are many different types of dementia but the most common form is Alzheimer's disease.

Maybe you engage in exercise and eat healthily to maintain your physical health and well-being, but did you know that you are also benefiting your mental health?

There is mounting scientific evidence showing that positive lifestyle decisions you make now will help to reduce your risk of developing dementia later in life. Making the right changes in diet, exercise, mental stimulation and social interaction are good for you and good for your brain.

Reducing your risk of dementia does not require huge lifestyle shifts, but small changes in four key areas that will greatly benefit your mental health.

Healthy eating and the brain

Whilst awareness of the link between what we consume and how it affects our physical health and wellbeing is increasing, the link between diet and brain health is less recognised. However, the same healthy diet that protects against diseases such as coronary heart disease, diabetes and strokes also protects our brain. There is growing evidence that what we eat is one of the factors that affects our risk of dementia.

So what should we be eating to ensure we are brain healthy? Our bodies and minds need a balanced diet to make sure we receive the correct amounts of vitamins, minerals, protein and fibre. Vitamins and minerals are vital for repairing damage to the body caused by free radicals and are naturally occurring in fresh fruit and vegetables such as berries, walnuts, sunflower seeds and ginger.

Evidence also supports the consumption of Omega 3 fatty acids found in oily fish such as mackerel and salmon as it could help reduce the risk of dementia by up to 60 per cent if eaten at least once a week. It is also important to avoid excess salt in food as research into vascular dementia has shown that high blood pressure, which is linked to high salt in take is known to increase the likelihood of the illness.

Physical activity and the brain

Physical activity helps the body to remain healthy and mobile by keeping joints and muscles in good condition and keeping the heart and blood circulation pumping. It is also good for the brain. Although it is still not clear why this is the case, it is likely to do with improving blood flow to the brain, enabling it to carry out its function.

If images of gyms and aerobic studios fill you with dread there is no need to panic. The recommended minimum level of physical activity for adults is 30 minutes of moderate activity most days and could include cycling, jogging, brisk walks, an afternoon gardening or simply using the stairs instead of catching the lift - anything that increases your heart rate and makes you breathe more deeply. An American study of 3,375 men and women over the age of 65 found that those who took part in four or more different kinds of physical activity had about half the risk of developing dementia of those who did just one or none of these activities. Activities included walking, housework, gardening, golfing and swimming.

Mental activity and the brain

The phrase 'use it or lose it' is perhaps most pertinent to older people who are beginning to notice a decline in their abilities to retain and process information. Evidence also suggests that mental stimulation may have a preventative effect for illnesses such as dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

One American study asked subjects to look back on their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s and report on which leisure activities they had taken part in and for how long each month. People who had done more intellectual activities in their 20s and 30s were at a lower risk for Alzheimer's disease. Intellectual activities included things like reading, doing jigsaws and other puzzles, playing a musical instrument, writing letters, playing board games, doing crafts or home repairs. Those who had increased their intellectual activities after their 30s also reduced their risk of Alzheimer's disease by up to 47 per cent.

So doing the crossword every morning might drive you to distraction, but it could also be helping to increase your cognitive reserve enabling your brain to adapt more in some areas to make up for other damaged areas. Think of your brain as a muscle that requires exercising in the same way as other muscles in your body.

Social activity and the brain

It is only recently that scientists have begun looking at the effects of social interaction and how it might affect human health, in particular the risk of developing dementia. However the evidence so far suggests that maintaining and developing social activities could be good for your brain.

It is thought that as with mental stimulation, social interaction may help to build cognitive reserves. A lot of the evidence showing the benefits of social interaction comes

from Sweden and one study in particular showed that having a poor or limited social network increased the risk of dementia by up to 60 per cent. Later studies from the same large scale project found that activities involving mental, physical and social stimulation individually offered some protection against dementia but that combining two or three of these offered the most benefit.

With our increasingly hectic lifestyles we tend to make ourselves our last priority. It is therefore important to make sure you do something sociable and enjoyable every day. Activities that combine mental, physical and social stimulation may be even better for protecting against dementia. Keep in touch with friends and family by phone, email or a letter, go out with friends or colleagues, volunteer for something that interests you or join a club. If you are coming up to retirement, plan how you will remain socially involved – you could start a completely new and different hobby!

Conclusion and further information

In summary, more and more research continues to highlight that there are certain things we can do now to actively reduce our risk of developing dementia later in life. However it is important to note that much of this evidence comes from studies of large groups of people and that the evidence might not apply to an individual. There is no guarantee that acting even on the best evidence available, will help a particular person avoid or delay the onset of dementia. However, making these lifestyle changes means you are taking informed and empowering steps to improving your mental and physical health whatever your age and there is no doubt that this is good for you, and good for your brain.

For more information on how you can reduce the risk of developing dementia visit www.goodforyourbrain.org

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